

## Prologue: Whispers in the Dark

August 1993

It was perhaps the part of his job that English Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge hated the most.

He could take the bumbling idiots that served beneath him. He could take the incompetence of the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, and the headaches that accompanied a Muggle escaping to tell half the town about what he saw. He could even take the purebloods breathing down his neck about destroying the Muggle Protection Act.

He could even take the constant questions about Harry Potter, and what the Ministry was going to do with him.

The answer to that question was, of course, nothing. Potter was at Hogwarts, under the guard of Dumbledore and his guardian. Fudge would be a fool to go toe-to-toe with Daphne Dressler. The woman had a number of powerful allies. She'd certainly trounce him in a duel.

*For that matter, Cornelius thought as he shivered in the cold air of the North Sea, I doubt any of my Aurors would be able to defeat her. Especially if these ridiculous rumors about the Grey Maiden defeating a shade of You-Know-Who were true...*

Of course, the Daphne Artemis Dressler's reputation preceded her. It was entirely possible that she had done just that.

Cornelius hugged his arms closer to himself, looking out over the prow of the small boat that was taking him to the place he hated more than any place in the entire world. A gloomy dark hellhole on a craggy island nearly twenty miles from the shores of the Orkneys.

Azkaban.

The very name sent shivers down the backs on many wizards and witches, and Cornelius was no exception. As if the island was not terrifying enough, with the cold downpours and hurricane force winds sending salty spray into the rocky shores, the guards somehow made it worse.

Dementors. Foul, hideous creatures that had been bound to wizards for five centuries. The Dementors fed on happy thoughts and emotions, but of course, their favorite source of nourishment was human souls...

Cornelius shivered. *Foul, foul creatures...*

“Are you alright, sir?” Auror James Dawlish asked. Dawlish had been with Cornelius since his childhood and the man was a damn good Auror. Both Dawlish and Fudge’s fathers had home schooled their boys, believing Armando Dippet a disgrace to Pureblood Wizards. Both were from Light families, who, nonetheless, held true to the old ways. That said, Cornelius had nothing against Muggleborns; he employed a number of them. Cornelius valued loyalty and wanted his people in positions of power; it was the best way to work the system. If a Muggleborn witch believed in his views and was willing to work for him and advance his goals, and a pureblood was not...?

Why *not* take the Muggleborn? Why sacrifice what you want because of something as stupid as... *blood*?

A spray of cold saltwater caught him in the face as the boat hit a wave. To prevent escapes, it was impossible to cast magic on this stretch of the ocean. Wands had to be adjusted by special technicians to function on the island. Obviously, the Aurors needed such wands, but some of the prisoners were dangerous Death Eaters, some of who had at least partial command of wandless magic.

They finally reached the landing and Aurors Dawlish and Sarah McGlinchy, the daughter of one of Cornelius’s top advisors, helped him out of the rocking boat. Cornelius was just happy to be on dry land, even if the gloom and despair of the Dementors assaulted him as soon as he’d gotten his bearings.

“Bloody wraiths...” he muttered under his breath.

“What was that, sir?” McGlinchy asked.

“Nothing, nothing,” Cornelius muttered. “Let’s see these prisoners and get off this bloody island.” Dawlish nodded vigorously. He didn’t like it anymore than his superior.

They approached the massive gates, which swung open after a signal from Dawlish to his Red-Robed comrade manning the only entrance in the outer wall of the fortress. Cornelius knew that Azkaban had been built almost two millennia ago. From the Goblin and Elven Runes that could be found scattered throughout the structure, if they had not constructed it, they had played a large role. It had been under the rule of the Goblins until 1538, when it was ceded to wizards under the terms of the peace treaty that, in exchange, gave Goblins exclusive mining rights. There was a reason that no Muggle ever discovered the vast gold and silver deposits in Wales.

His father had believed that any respectable wizard should know the history of those that preceded him. Hence, Cornelius had studied the history of the wizarding world with a passion. But what Cornelius had focused on was the politics, and how to manipulate the system to one's own gain. His father had been quite pleased when he demonstrated his knowledge, but sadly, Edward Fudge had died four months before Cornelius was elected to Minister.

They walked through the dank, dark corridors of the fortress, leading to the inner walls, where the prisoners were kept. At the time, there were about forty. Around twenty-five were former Death Eaters, and kept under top security, with Dementors patrolling directly outside the cells. The remainder was serving short terms of 1 month to 5 years, with only a few exceptions. They merely had to stomach the presence of the Dementors, though they weren't exposed to them directly.

They passed by a number of cells. Fudge gave an occasional glance to the huddled forms inside. Most of them still looked relatively healthy. They were fed a decent meal at regular intervals. While prison fare was no banquet, it was tolerable, or so said the guards. The prisoners often had other ideas.

Fudge didn't recognize any of the men until they reached the last cell. Mundungus Fletcher was huddled in the corner, shivering and trying to eat a bowl of stew. Cornelius vaguely remembered the facts of the case. If his memory served him right, Fletcher was serving the second week of his one month sentence for his fourth charge of thievery. In this case, of several valuable potion ingredients. The

bumbling idiot might have gotten away with it, too, if he hadn't run directly into an off-duty Auror that was patrolling around Knockturn Alley. Petty thieves like Fletcher were rarely sent to Azkaban; they were mostly held from one day to five years in the prisons beneath the Ministry Complex. No Dementors there.

Dawlish and McGlinchy saluted the guards, who responded in kind. Cornelius acknowledged them with a wave, and they opened the gates into the top security cells. An Auror greeted them. He wore the red robes, of course, but with a patch on his breast that identified him as a Commander. For simplicity's sake, only three ranks existed in the Aurors: trainee, graduate, and commander.

The man was tall with well-trimmed light brown hair and blue eyes. He was younger than Cornelius, but had a grizzled edge to him that implied experience. In this hellhole, in the middle of the ocean, he was the picture of health. "Minister Fudge, I am Commander Thaddeus Griffin, Head Warden of Azkaban Prison."

"Can we just get this over with?" Cornelius asked, shivering. "I don't want to be here any longer than I have to."

Griffin nodded. "Very well, right this way, sir."

They began to walk. The cells they passed were empty, or at least appeared to be. It was possible that the inmates were hiding under the stone benches covered in straw that served as beds.

"Commander Griffin?" Dawlish asked.

The man stopped and turned around. "Yes?"

"Can you insure that we encounter no Dementors? None of us are very fond of them."

Griffin snorted. "I might be concerned if you were. We've sent Patronuses through the path we're following, but I can't make any promises."

"We'll take what you can offer Commander...let's just get going!" Cornelius implored. He *hated* this place.

"Very well sir," Griffin replied. "Our report on the prison is rather simple. We've had no inmate deaths since your last visit, and no additions to the You-Know-Who Section...that's the high security area," he clarified. "No escapes, obviously, we've never had one. The Dementors are content for the moment it seems. Other than that, sir...really, everything's going as it always does."

"Excellent, Commander," Cornelius said. He really appreciated the work of people like Griffin. "Let's get on with the tour."

Griffin snorted again. Cornelius thought maybe he should revise his opinion of the man. "Yes sir."

They began to walk, and Griffin would name the prisoner in each. He heard the names of some of the most feared Death Eaters alive, such as Dolohov, Rookwood, two of the Lestranges, Jugson, Mulciber, Yaxley, Travers, Coran, Harkness...it was a roll call of You-Know-Who's best and deadliest.

Finally, they reached the final two cells, where their guide had to chase away a persistent Dementor that appeared to be interacting with a woman that Cornelius recognized on sight. Bellatrix Black Lestrange had once been beautiful, but her skeletal frame, sunken features, and hooded eyes made her appearance hideous. A glance into her eyes was all it took to know that she had lost her sanity long ago. Only *she* would attempt to converse with a Dementor...

If Bellatrix was the most disturbed Death Eater, by far the strangest was in the next cell.

"And here's good ole' Sirius Black," Griffin said, indicating the figure sitting upright on his bench, in tattered clothing and with hair that looked like it hadn't seen a comb or a Hair Arranging Charm since his birth. He gave Cornelius a calculating look. Then his eyes darted to the lump in the Minister's jacket.

Cornelius shook his head in disgust when a voice called out behind him. "Oi, Fudge!"

Cornelius turned around. Black was standing in his cell, beckoning for him to return. He approached the inmate cautiously. "What do you want, Black?"

"Just that newspaper you've got," Black said quite calmly. "Always loved the crossword...plus, it's nice to know what's going on, eh?"

Cornelius shrugged. The issue was over a month old, and he'd read it thoroughly. He wasn't completely sure why he'd forgotten to take it out of his coat. *Why not?*

Bellatrix was cackling something now, and whispered something to his cousin that Black neither reacted to nor pretended not to hear. *Why do I care about what that insane bitch is saying anyway?*

"Here," Cornelius said finally. He shoved the rolled-up paper through the bars. Black walked over and picked it up.

"Thanks Minister, I'll vote for you next election."

Cornelius rolled his eyes. "Let's go," he said to McGlinchy and Dawlish.

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Sirius watched as the Minister of Magic and his bodyguards, neither of whom he recognized, walk back through the cellblocks. Turning away, Sirius retreated to his 'bed.' The Dementors would likely be returning soon, and the farther from the bars he was, the better.

He learned this in many long years of unjust imprisonment at Azkaban. He'd also learned that protesting his innocence was simply a way to earn Silencing Charms from irritated guards. And the Dementors certainly didn't care.

His innocence did have one benefit, though. He never had to relive torture at the hands of his Master, Voldemort, like so many of the Death Eaters at Azkaban. He did not have to relive the horrific crimes he had committed. He *had* killed, but he had never seen either the man's or the woman's face, and thus they did not haunt him when the Dementors drew close.

No, his worst memories were probably those of a burning cottage on the outskirts of Godric's Hollow, and the crushing, sinking, hollow feeling of having failed to protect those who had become his family. It had started with James's argument with Remus... *Merlin, where is that old wolf now...?*

Sirius carefully unfolded the paper, flattening it on the bench. His eyes scanned rapidly over the headlines. *Same old junk, hasn't changed in twelve years...weather...sucks this time of year...purebloods...Lucius...bloody death eater...St. Mungo's...when are they not getting tremendous donations...let's see...anniversaries of Goblin rebellion...how hypocritical can we get...Boy-Who-Lived...heard that before...*

*Wait a second...Harry..?*

*Bloody hell I've been out of touch for too long,* Sirius grumbled to himself. *Boy-Who-Lived..? ...ah, of course, Daphne thought he'd survived that curse...guess everybody knows now...*

The mere thought of Harry was enough to drive even the mundane thoughts that he used to keep the Dementors at bay out of his head. It brought back memories of those hellish twenty-four hours. He had already lost one friend, who thought they were turning on him because of *what* he was, then he was betrayed by another...and then two of his friends had died as a direct result of the cowardice of Wormtail.

And their son, Harry...He had been taken away by a woman that Sirius, Remus, James, and Lily had all thought they'd lost to the darkness. Sirius had been one of the first Aurors to reach the home where Edmond and Daphne had lived...the carnage was gruesome to behold.

It was even worse to know that it was done by Lily's best friend.

Sirius snapped out of his reverie and began to read the article where he had seen Harry's moniker mentioned. He noted the date. It was nearly a month and half old. At least it was if his sense of time was at all accurate. Sirius had been able to figure out the date by using the equinoxes and solstices as starting points. He'd also overheard the

occasional conversation when one of the guards mentioned the day or month. Sirius had always been good at keeping time, just a strange ability that was very useful...or had the potential to drive a person into depression, depending on which way you looked at it.

Either way, Fudge had had the newspaper in his pocket for quite a while. Probably why the Minister was so willing to give it away.

### *The Boy-Who-Lived: Innocent Victim or Dark Prodigy?*

*By Rita Skeeter*

*Ever since our sons and daughters returned home with the stunning stories of what had happened during the 1992-1993 school term at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the central issue has revolved around the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry Potter.*

*Potter, 13, to the best of this reporter's knowledge, remains unconscious in Hogwarts' infirmary. No information has been given as to his specific condition or as to why he has not been moved to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Ailments. The only information known was gleaned from student's recollections of the End of Term Speech by Headmaster Albus Dumbledore. Dumbledore explained a great deal, and also revealed that Harry Potter was seriously injured and was "fighting for his life and his sanity."*

*An accredited professional in the Mental Care Ward of St. Mungo's, who wished to remain unnamed, says that "I believe that Mr. Potter suffered some sort of mental trauma from his ordeal. If he truly was possessed, it is possible that the possessing spirit (whether it was You-Know-Who or not) was violently removed. I've seen cases where that action has caused serious damage before."*

*But it is what occurred during the school term involving Mr. Potter that is most shocking.*

*During the year, no less than six students, along with the caretaker's cat, were attacked by the mysterious 'Heir of Slytherin.' Little information was given, and the students were forced to rely on little more than rumors. Hogwarts staff refused to answer any questions.*

*Reports indicate that Mr. Potter was a likely candidate from the beginning. “He’s a Parselmouth,” a student reported. “He’s very quiet, isn’t around much. He basically sticks with his friends and that’s it.” Mr. Potter is also among the top students at the school and is also known for “knowing all kinds of spells they definitely don’t teach second years.”*

*However, no matter how mysterious Mr. Potter is, the fact remains that the thirteen-year old is not the Heir of Slytherin. In his End of Term Speech, Headmaster Dumbledore addressed a number of issues. From the students we’ve interviewed, we understand that he absolved Mr. Potter of any wrongdoing, claiming that he was an innocent victim. In fact, a number of students claim that Albus Dumbledore seemed to show a great deal of concern for how the Boy-Who-Lived was viewed and treated by his peers. “Dumbledore is definitely looking out for him,” Seamus Finnegan, a Gryffindor in Potter’s year, said of the venerable Headmaster.*

*Regardless, the mystery surrounding Harry Potter’s involvement in the attacks is far from solved. How complicit was Mr. Potter? Did he know of his possession and fail to inform others? Was there a possession at all? How did Harry Potter’s guardian, the legendary ex-Auror Daphne Dressler, fail to notice his behavior? How did Albus Dumbledore fail to detect such terrible events until it was too late?*

*This reporter will continue to work to find the truth.*

Sirius felt the blood rush from his face. He couldn’t believe what he was reading. His Harry, his Godson, James’s only son...attacking students?

It simply could not be true. It would mean that maybe they had been right about Daphne...but surely Dumbledore would have done something if Daphne wasn’t a good guardian? He cares about Harry’s welfare, doesn’t he?

Sirius knew that Lily and James Potter had been two of Dumbledore’s favorite pupils. Both had endeared themselves to a Hogwarts Professor; James had been McGonagall’s favorite, Lily had been one of the first members of the ‘Slug Club,’ started by their Potions Professor, Horace Slughorn.

Surely his attachment would carry over to Harry...

*But what if he doesn't know? Or if Daphne won't let him take Harry from her...she was always so protective of Lily, even more so after she lost her family. Harry's the only 'family' she has left. She'd probably fight tooth and nail to keep him...and she was never against using Dark Magic. Has she taught it to Harry?*

That would make sense, unfortunately, Sirius knew. Daphne would want Harry to be able to defend himself. And she would probably go to *any* length to keep him safe.

Harry was thirteen. Sirius could not believe it had been that long. *I wonder what he looks like...*

*Snap out of it, Sirius. Your Godson might be in danger!*

His inner voice had a point. Whatever the situation, something was wrong. And he was the Godfather; he was the one who had been given the task of taking care of Harry if something should happen to his parents.

*But what can I do? I can't escape!*

*What about Padfoot? The Dementors can't find him.*

Sirius had often used his dog animagus form to escape the effects of the Dementors. The emotions of a dog were much less, well...human. They were less complex and more animalistic. Dementors were blind, but they could find prey by focusing not on magic, but on emotions. He was *probably* thin enough to sneak through the bars...

*It won't be easy. But I've got to do it. I've got to do it for Harry...*

*I need to get my Godson back...*

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*A/N: Welcome to book3. Bet you weren't expecting the book to begin with Cornelius Fudge.*

So, here you see my first big departure from canon. If Pettigrew was on the front page, he didn't look close enough to see it. This book could be described as a case study of misunderstandings. So Sirius is going to try to take Harry away from Daphne...not a good idea.

Speaking of our hero, you'll find out how he's doing next chapter, but he's not going to be insane. He'll 'relapse' at times into his worst memories, and he'll be a little less 'young,' but he's too strong a character to be changed that easily.

New allies? What could that mean? Hmm...

Adios Amigos!

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

## Chapter 1: Atonement

Minerva McGonagall had been a part of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for almost fifty years. She had been a part of war almost as long. Her schoolgirl days had ended before she even graduated, during the desperate Light attack against Grindelwald's forces in the Pas-De-Calais. The attack, which coincided with the Muggle Allied offensive at Normandy in 1944, had required the presence of almost every wizard or witch over the age of fifteen. It had also been a major victory, though it came at a high cost. On the bloody battlefields on the French countryside outside the port of Le Havre, Minerva had first seen the auburn-haired Light Sorcerer Albus Dumbledore in action.

The man had been her Transfiguration Professor at school, and she, of course, had been his star pupil from the first day. Minerva was one of the greatest Transfiguration Mistresses in Wizarding history. Ironically, she had only a fraction of the ability of her great-grandfather Ulysses McGonagall. The man, who could wandlessly transfigure objects at the age of ten, had been the last Light Sorcerer before Dumbledore and had elevated the McGonagall family to prominence in pureblood society.

Of course, Minerva knew that sadly, that noble line would end with her. She had never married, never bore children. She'd been an only child, just like her mother. Minerva had loved, once, long ago. Unfortunately, the man of her dreams had turned about to be much different than she had hoped. They never had a chance. Aurelis Brightwing had died in one of the last battles with Grindelwald, in the Battle of the Ruhr Valley. Dumbledore had obliterated Grindelwald's armies, crushing his followers, the Knights of Walpurgis, and his armies of trolls and giants.

Grindelwald's death had come in a final, last ditch attempt at the bastion of Light: Hogwarts. Unlike the Siege of Hogwarts some thirty years later, the battle had been short and brief. Dumbledore had struck down Grindelwald in one-on-one combat, in a fireworks display that put all other fighting on hold as the two powerful wizards clashed. The display of power had actually affected the weather patterns, and

lighting flashes through the torrential downpour, obscuring the vision of all.

Dumbledore's fatal blow had not been with a Killing Curse. Rather, he had called upon an Ancient Light Purification Ritual which could tear the Dark Magic from one's soul. It was immensely complex requiring a staggering amount of power and a severely weakened foe. Grindelwald had been left broken, half-alive, half-dead. He hadn't survived long after that, dying before he could actually be brought to trial. With their Lord's defeat, the Knights of Walpurgis had fled, disappearing back into normal society. Some would later become Death Eaters, or parents of Death Eaters. Strangely enough, many Muggleborns had joined Grindelwald's armies. Unlike his successor, Grindelwald, who regularly communicated with Adolph Hitler just as Dumbledore conversed with Winston Churchill, was not interested in blood purity. He wanted power, pure and simple. He promised reform to a corrupt system.

*They were fools to believe that he wanted anything of the kind,* Minerva thought bitterly. *And I lost many friends because of their foolishness...*

Perhaps the only intelligent decision made by either side was to keep the wizarding world a secret. Massive Muggle-Repelling Charms could be placed on enormous swathes of land. If there were Muggle casualties, they could always be explained as victims of Muggle warfare. And often, there was, and they were. Either way, the *Wehrmacht* had never fought alongside the Knights of Walpurgis. The *Luftwaffe* had never flown alongside the Dragon Masters. The Army of Light had never participated in an attack by the Allied Armies.

Such it was as it should have been. Muggles against Muggles. Wizards against Wizards; it had been that way for centuries. Voldemort was among the first to make Muggles part of his war tactics. He did it not because it made tactical sense, but out of deep hatred and disdain for their lives, and because it preyed upon the morality of Light Wizards.

But regardless of the events themselves, the War against Grindelwald had taught her about the deepest, darkest depths of

human suffering. It had shown her just how far wizards and Muggles alike would go to kill each other. It had shown her cruelty beyond her imagination.

And so, as she watched and heard Daphne Artemis Dressler humming 'Happy Birthday' to the unconscious form of her adopted son on the night of July 31st, a full two months after the boy had been critically wounded in the battle in the Chamber of Secrets, her heart went out to the thirty-two year-old woman.

What had happened in the Chamber of Secrets had clearly come close to breaking the emotionally unstable Grey Maiden. It was bad enough that she had come within inches of not only losing her adopted son, but she narrowly avoided being complicit in the return of the most powerful Dark Lord in centuries. Voldemort's power and persuasive abilities both vastly exceeded those of Grindelwald, especially in the latter area. While this sixteen-year old form might not have been quite as dangerous, he would have been able to draw upon the power of two other magical cores. So it was possible he might have even *exceeded* the power of Lord Voldemort at his peak. But it had been averted, and Daphne was the one responsible.

*But at what price..?*

She was forced to think quickly. From the woman's accounts, she had been within but two syllables of death when Ginny Weasley had intervened. She had a split second to think, and only one shot to execute it. Her body had enough reserves left for one spell, and she had chosen poorly, in hindsight. At the time, it was clearly the best option, perhaps the *only* option.

*But none of that matters to Daphne*, Minerva thought as she watched the woman kiss Harry on the forehead, then run a hand through his hair. Her eyes glistened, and she took several deep breaths before sitting down in her chair, picking up another book. At this rate, she would read half the Hogwarts' Library by the time the summer was over. Minerva had not wanted to ask Daphne about the possibility of moving Harry to St. Mungo's if he had not recovered at that time. They could not keep him here during the school year.

Minerva began to feel guilty for spying on Daphne. Truth be told, she was amazed that she had not been spotted by now. Even though she was currently transformed, Daphne knew the markings of her cat Animagus form as well as anyone. In addition, Minerva and Mrs. Norris were the only cats at Hogwarts. And Daphne could *certainly* recognize Mrs. Norris. The long-lived Kneazle had been a kitten when she'd been at school.

Sure enough...

"Minerva," Daphne asked, exasperation and exhaustion showing in her voice, "can you give us some privacy? I understand your concern, but it's my son's birthday and I want to share that with him."

Minerva transformed. "I'm sorry Daphne."

"Don't be," the Grey Maiden sighed. Minerva was shocked at just how awful she looked. Her skin was pale and her face was taught and stressed. Her eyes were cloudy, with a combination of misery, pain and guilt. There were dark bags under her eyes. *She looked fine at dinner, and from afar...*

"I suppose I forgot to redo the Glamour Charm," Daphne said in a dead voice.

"You've been using a Glamour Charm?" Minerva asked. Daphne nodded.

"Are you really that surprised?" her former pupil asked her. "Do you really think I get more than an hour of sleep a night, or eat anymore than is necessary to sustain me after what I did to him?" she asked, gesturing at her ward.

Minerva stared. She'd been impressed with how well Daphne was holding together. It seemed like her earlier estimation had been far from the truth. The woman looked dead on her feet, and even worse, had the sort of anguished look that she hadn't seen in years. *Then again, I didn't see her just after she lost Edmond...*

"It wasn't your fault, Daphne," Minerva insisted. "You did the only thing you could do—"

"Stop it," she snapped angrily. Then her features relaxed, the brief life she'd shown fading quickly. "It was my fault. I cast the curse that made him like this. I failed to realize that something was dreadfully wrong with him. I cast *Crucio* on him. *My fault.*"

"*You cast the Cruciatus..?*" Minerva repeated incredulously.

Daphne did not nod, or even move. "Yes," she said in a lifeless voice. "I lost control. My anger got the better of me, and Harry paid the price."

"*Oh, Daphne...*" Minerva breathed.

"Please leave, Minerva," Daphne said quietly. Minerva gave another apologetic glance and left the room.

It was painful for both of them. Daphne because she had brought so much pain and suffering upon the one she loved, Minerva because it brought back very unpleasant memories from the not-so-distant past. As the Deputy Headmistress and Dumbledore's 2nd in command of the Order of the Phoenix, she had seen first-hand the suffering inflicted upon innocents and soldiers alike by the Death Eaters.

But probably the most disturbing sight she had ever seen came after she received the call about the attack on the O'Connor Sanctuary...

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*Minerva had just been about to retire when her fireplace flared to life. She'd gone home for two days to meet with one of her cousins for the Christmas Holliday. Dumbledore had more or less insisted that she go and get away from the war and the fighting, as well as the everyday administration of the school.*

"MINERVA!" a voice yelled.

*She hurried downstairs, grateful she hadn't yet put on her bathrobe. She hustled over to the fireplace, where a face was sitting in the green floo flames. It was a grizzled, unshaved man with a misshapen nose, an eye-patch over one eye, and a very worried expression on his face. His eyes, however, were cold. "MINERVA!"*

*"I'm here Alastor, what is it?"*

*Moody sighed. "O'Connor Sanctuary's been attacked. I'm organizing the Aurors and the Order, but I need you to go there first."*

*"Why in Merlin's name—" Minerva began.*

*"Because the only survivor was Daphne, and she's in a bad way. Not physically, though she looks awful. But she's just...not there..."* Moody said, trailing off. He obviously didn't know how to approach a traumatized teenage girl.

*"How do you know this?" Minerva demanded.*

*"Because the alarm was signaled by Daphne herself, my reader says so."*

*Each of the households of families involved in either the fledgling Order of the Phoenix or close to Dumbledore had a signal device that would send a distress signal. It was undetectable by Death Eaters, and also identified the person that sent it by their magical signature. Alastor had a 'reader' which actually sent an image of the person that used the alarm.*

*Minerva paled. "Oh Merlin..."*

*"We need YOU to get over there, she trusts you," Moody continued. "I've contacted Dumbledore, and he agrees."*

*Minerva nodded, closed her eyes, and Apparated to the ancestral home of the O'Connor Clan.*

*Her first indication that something was wrong is that she had landed inside the Anti-Apparation Wards, meaning that they were no longer functioning. This also meant that Aurelis O'Connor was dead. As the patriarch of the family, the wards were keyed to him. He had not named a magical heir at the time, so when he died, the wards did as well.*

*Her second indication was the fact that little of the sizable manor house appeared to be intact. Half of the building was torn away,*

*crushed into piles of rubble on the ground, as if giants had used entire rooms and hallways as their playthings. The rest of the house was gutted, gaping black holes spewing thick black smoke into the air. The windows were shattered, the door smashed into kindling. Minerva hurried up the steps, through the open door, extinguishing fires as she went. She entered the kitchen, and found a sight that made her want to vomit.*

*Hester Logan O'Connor was bound with blackened rope, her hands tied to a part of the stove so as to leave them directly over the flame. They were blackened and burned, indicating that the attackers had done just that. The woman had dried blood coming from her nose, mouth, and ears; she'd obviously been mercilessly tortured with the Cruciatus Curse. Her blue eyes were wide-open, but somehow were so darkened by the effects of torture that they appeared to be gaping holes in her head. Her mouth was open and she appeared to have been in mid-scream. Now that rigor mortis had set in, that facial expression remained. In the center of her chest was a gaping slash, likely from a Slicing Curse at point-blank range. Her clothing was covered in her own blood and so was the floor. Minerva's hand was over her mouth. She closed her eyes, and began searching for the rest of the family of four.*

*She found Aurelis next, in a sitting room. The smell of burning flesh made her eyes water. He was tied to the back of the fireplace. His skin was charred and blackened, his eyes black holes. His mouth was open in a full scream. Congealing blood coated the floor, making it obvious that he might have actually been close to bleeding to death before his tormenter cremated him alive. Then Minerva noticed that his right leg was gone below the knee. His right arm had been torn clean off his body. She found both body parts hurled across the room. Her throat burned, and this time Minerva did not fight it, vomiting onto the blood covered floor. She'd never seen such deliberate carnage, not even on the battlefields. The O'Connor's attackers had reached new levels of human cruelty.*

*Then she heard something faint and soft. It sounded like a muffled sob. Daphne.*

*Minerva cautiously advanced into the next room. It had once been a study, but the door was blown askew, the far wall was blown to pieces, and the furniture was upended or destroyed.*

*Standing in the middle of this hellish scene was a fifteen year old girl. Clutched so tightly in her arms that they were white from a lack of blood flow was a two-year old toddler with blond hair. Daphne spun abruptly when Minerva entered the room, shifting the boy's weight and drawing her wand.*

*It was when the boy's head lolled back limply, and his body did not at all resist Daphne's movement, that Minerva knew that Andrew O'Connor was dead. Daphne continued to clutch the corpse of her baby brother close to her body, almost like a mother defending her child. In this case, it was a sister too badly hurt and traumatized to realize that her little brother no longer required any form of protection.*

*"Who are you?" she asked quietly, her wand shaking. Minerva was horrified as she stared into the scared, wide eyes of the teenage girl. She was trembling, and her breathing was quick and labored. She was obviously in shock. Physically, she appeared not to be seriously injured, but she looked terrible. Her robes were torn and bloody, and her face was badly bruised. Her blond hair was in disarray and speckled with flecks of blood.*

*"It's me, Daphne," she said kindly, trying to keep her revulsion from making the situation (and the smell) worse.*

*"P-p-professor M-m-mcGonagall?" she asked in a shaking, scared voice. Minerva was having a hard time believing that she was talking to a young woman who was normally very strong and forceful in both personality and decision. In her place was a scared little girl who had just seen her entire world obliterated before her eyes.*

*"Yes dear," she said. "It's me. You're safe. They aren't going to hurt you anymore."*

*Just as she said this, she heard a series of profanities and gasps of disbelief, along with loud footsteps. The Order had arrived. Daphne clutched her brother's body even closer, backing up a few steps towards the upturned desk.*

*The footsteps drew closer, and Daphne began to whimper slightly. Her wand fell from her fingers, but she didn't seem to notice. Minerva went to greet the source of the loud noises. "Would you stop making such a racket, Diggle?" she asked angrily. "And you, Shacklebolt, Vance, you should know better!"*

*The three senior order members withered under her glare like a trio of schoolchildren. More footsteps were heard, along with the sound of at least one person being sick. They must have happened upon one of the bodies.*

*Alastor Moody, accompanied by Marlene McKinnon and the Prewett brothers, were the next to approach. By the looks of it, Marlene was ready to faint. She'd probably been the one who'd happened upon one of the bodies. Gideon was almost green, while Fabian looked murderous.*

*"Is Daphne in there?" Moody asked gruffly.*

*"Yes," Minerva replied quietly. "I need time alone with her, she's in shock. Get the O'Connor's out of here and start looking for clues as to who committed this...atrocity..."*

*"I'll call in Dorry," Fabian said, referring to Dorcas Meadows, the only Healer in the Order. "She'll probably need to be cleaned up, at least ...and her brother?"*

*Minerva shook her head. "Daphne's got him... he's dead," she added as an afterthought. "Where's Albus?"*

*"Trying to figure out how this happened," Gideon explained. "He doesn't understand why we didn't know sooner. This obviously took place hours ago. Aberforth was talking to him about various ways they might have destroyed the wards."*

*Minerva nodded. Among the many subjects that Albus's younger brother was an expert in was wards and their operation. Another was alcoholic beverages, not that it mattered at the time. Though many Aurors stopping by the Hog's Head certainly appreciated his expertise as they sought to drown their memories. Minerva did not*

*drink, but was starting to wonder if it really was that bad an idea. It certainly looked appealing at the moment.*

*"We'll let you handle the girl," Shacklebolt said in his deep voice. "Fabian, Gideon, let's start combing the wreckage. Somebody was using some heavy duty spellwork to bring down this house."*

*Minerva re-entered the room. Daphne's eyes flicked up, and she made to draw her wand...before discovering it wasn't there. Keeping her eyes on Minerva the entire time, she bent down to retrieve it. "What do you want?" she snapped. But the anger was diluted by despair.*

*Minerva moved forward, and Daphne moved back, huddling closer, and squeezing Andrew tighter. Minerva sighed. "He's dead, Daphne," she said. "I'm sorry."*

*"...I know..." Daphne whispered so softly it came out as a squeak. "...he got hurt when Mum dropped him, when she got hit...he stopped breathing...I couldn't do anything..."*

*Minerva took a slow step forward, offering her hand. This time, Daphne did not withdraw. "I just want to help, Daphne. I am unarmed." For emphasis, she spread her palms wide.*

*"The Death Eaters did things without wands," she replied stubbornly, her vocabulary almost child-like. Daphne certainly knew what wandless magic was. But once again, the fire in her eyes died. "But you aren't a Death Eater..."*

*"No, I most certainly am not," Minerva replied. She tried to keep as much of her sternness out of her voice as possible. Daphne needed healing, not lecturing. "Come out, Daphne," she implored, "we care about you."*

*"I know..." she said, rocking Andrew's body back and forth. "...a-a-alright..." she said, stuttering over her words again. She took an uncertain step forward. Minerva opened her arms to take the boy's body, but Daphne stopped and shook her head violently. Minerva gave up. She moved closer, and carefully extended a hand to the girl's shoulder. When she touched it, Daphne stiffened, but did not*

*strike her or try to run. She took a deep, shaky breath, and allowed Minerva to guide her out of the destroyed manor. She took pains to insure that Daphne did not see her parents' bodies, though she feared it was already too late. The way Daphne was behaving, and that her robes were coated in blood from the thighs down (which meant she might have been kneeling,) made it almost certain she'd seen both of them. Minerva didn't understand how she could have been beaten up so badly, yet survive. Still, that could wait.*

*They finally got outside. Daphne's movements were slow and stiff, as if she was unwilling to take each new step forwards. Her eyes were staring straight ahead, and she reacted to almost nothing. As they approached the outskirts, they saw a group of wizards and witches. Minerva recognized Dorcas Meadows from the light blue robes she wore, along with the red cross on the back and front that gave her status as a Combat Healer. Muggles used the same symbol, and for once, had thought of the idea first.*

*"Dorry!" Minerva cried. The short woman ran over. Minerva transfigured a branch into a stool, and Daphne sat on it, still staring straight ahead. After a bit of coaxing, Daphne weakly relinquished the body of her brother. Dorcas handed it to a sobbing Emeline, who carefully wrapped him in a white shroud. He would later be burned with his parents, (the normal funeral custom for pureblood wizards,) and his ashes scattered on the property.*

*Daphne was completely still as Dorcas carefully cleaned and healed her wounds and gave her several potions to drink. They both thought it best that Daphne be a bit more responsive and stable before she was brought into a large environment like Hogwarts or St. Mungo's.*

*Once the Healer was done, she patted the girl on the shoulder and whispered, "I'm so sorry, dear. You didn't deserve this."*

*Minerva bent beside the girl, whose hands were now folded on her lap. Her shoulders were hunched, and tears were glistening in her eyes. Yet she demonstrated the control that would be so renowned in her later years, and did not allow them to fall.*

*"Daphne, do you need anything?" Minerva asked quietly. She also shifted her body to block Daphne's view of the house. The bodies*

*were being brought out now on makeshift palls, carried by grim-faced men and women, some of whom she did not recognize. She realized that the Aurors had probably heard of the disturbance.*

*“...Lily...” she whispered. She turned her head for the first time. “I want to see Lily.”*

*Minerva nodded. “We’ll contact her, dear. But she’s on vacation with her parents, if memory serves me correct.”*

*“Find her,” Daphne said, with surprising force and conviction. “I need Lily.”*

*The next thing Minerva knew, Daphne had lunged at her and stared sobbing into her robes. Minerva had let her maternal instincts guide her, and straightened the teenage girl up before hugging her back tightly, whispering words of comfort that in all likelihood, Daphne could not hear...*

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Minerva wasn’t surprised to feel tears streaking down her face as she broke out of her memories. It was one of the most horrifying events of her life.

They had located Lily Evans, and Harry’s mother had managed to travel to Hogwarts faster than Minerva would have thought possible. She’d been a wreck when she arrived; the news of what had happened to Daphne had devastated her, but Lily’s mere presence seemed to bring Daphne back to life faster than anyone had thought possible. The return of Alice Duran and Elisha Wedley also helped.

Daphne had never spoken aloud to anyone about the specifics of that day, the memories were simply too painful. Instead, she had willingly allowed Dumbledore to take the memories to examine the events. The sequence had become painfully clear. Her mother had been making dinner. Her father had been starting a fire in the fireplace. Her brother had been in a carrier on the kitchen counter. Daphne had been playing the piano in the sitting room with her father.

When the wards had fallen, Aurelis O'Connor had ordered his daughter to find Andrew and escape. That hadn't happened.

No less than ten masked Death Eaters had smashed through the doors and windows. They stunned Daphne's mother, causing her to drop her son. Daphne had scooped up her brother and managed to fight a short but brutal fight through the now burning house. The Death Eaters had actually brought a pair of trolls with them, who were crudely destroying the house. Daphne had apparently been caught in a rain of falling debris just as she reached the cellar. It had sealed off the entrance. She'd heard her parents' screams as the McCourns tortured them, seeking information about Dumbledore's operations as well as simply indulging their bloodlust. Hours later, the Death Eaters had departed, leaving two mutilated bodies, a half-destroyed manor, a dead toddler, and a traumatized teenager who would eventually torture them into insanity.

Andrew had died soon after being dropped, the Morticians had determined he'd fractured his skull. The two-year old had died in his sister's arms. The Pensieve showed that Daphne had not let go of him once until Dorcas finally took him. About an hour after the Death Eaters left, she had used raw magic to blast through the rubble and extricate herself. Bruised and battered, she wandered into the kitchen and the sitting room, discovering the bodies. Her lack of reaction was almost more disturbing than what one would have expected her to do. She had knelt in a puddle of her mother's blood.

Then, she had slowly made her way to the wreckage of her father's study and activated the alarm, remaining there until Minerva had arrived.

The attack itself had been one of the most heinous crimes of the war. It was also the reason that Daphne was let go with no questions asked, and even allowed to continue Auror School, after she had learned and used the Cruciatus Curse on the murderers of her family. Only their insanity had saved them from execution, and there were still many in the Ministry who wanted the McCourns dead. They got their wish after two years in Azkaban.

Daphne had eventually begun to heal, and had gone on to a career that was the stuff of legends.

But she was never the same. Her innocence was gone, stripped away in the horrific display of human cruelty. Her love of learning remained, but gone was the glee that accompanied it. Her enthusiasm was replaced by a *drive*, a determination to be so skilled that nothing like what happened to her parents could ever happen to her again. In fact, the only times she ever relaxed was when she was with two people: Edmond Dressler and Lily Evans.

And ironically, no amount of training was able to save those two from death. *No wonder she clings so tightly to Harry. It's one thing to live with the fact that your loved ones may be taken from you at any time. It's another to live that reality more than once.*

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"Wotcher Professor," Nymphadora Tonks called out as she greeted Professor Flitwick near the Hospital Wing. Her salutation was, however, missing the energy and exuberance that defined the Auror Trainee. Tonks had found precious few reasons to be happy after she'd heard what had happened to her 'little brother.' She cared about Harry, but it didn't register with her just how much he mattered to her.

Her mother, Andromeda, followed behind her silently. She was wearing all black, and had a very serious expression on her face. She had not planned to come with her daughter originally, but Dumbledore had persuaded her that Daphne needed the companionship.

The small Ravenclaw Head of House looked up. "Miss Tonks," he said brightly. "How excellent to see you again. Is your training going well?" he asked excitedly. Tonks had been one of the first Ravenclaws to make it into the Aurors since Daphne Dressler; those who wore the blue and bronze tended to go into research or development jobs in the Ministry. The Aurors drew mostly from Slytherin and Gryffindor. The Healers existed because of Hufflepuffs. As a result, Flitwick had been absolutely thrilled when he had heard she had been accepted.

"Pretty good," Tonks said in a surprisingly dead-sounding voice. She was anxious to see Harry, yet at the same time, the thought of him lying there in a deep coma just depressed her. From what she had heard, he would probably wake up soon. The question that was eating at everyone was what condition he'd be in. His mind was healing, but just how much could he accomplish on his own?

Of course, Tonks didn't care what condition her little brother was in. The kid was special to her, and had a unique connection with her because of his Metamorphic talents. He was also able to put up with her immaturity and roguishness.

"I'm glad to hear that," Flitwick replied, shaking her out of her thoughts. "I assume you are here to see Mr. Potter?" he asked, the energy in his voice dropping a fair bit.

"Yeah," Tonks said. "I've been like a big sister to him for two years."

Flitwick smiled sadly. "I'm glad for that. He seemed quite lonely his first year."

"You have no idea," Tonks said. "I've got to go. Nice to see you, Professor."

"You as well, Nymphadora." Tonks winced at the mention of her name, but her focus was on the unconscious boy in the Hospital Wing. She earned the ire of her mother, but quickly terminated the conversation. She walked quickly up the stairs to the Hospital Wing and crossed the distance to Harry's bed even faster. Daphne was sitting in a chair beside it, staring into the distance.

"Wotcher Daphne," Tonks said, weakly raising a hand.

The woman turned around, blinking. "Hello Tonks, is Andromeda here?"

"Yup, Mum's right behind me," Tonks said. "How's he doing?"

"Still no change," Daphne replied in a dead-sounding voice. "He'll wake up, and we'll just have to see what we have to work with."

"He'll be okay, I think," Tonks said, trying to reassure both of them. "He's a strong kid."

"Strength doesn't mean everything, Tonks," Daphne replied tiredly.

"Sounds like you're speaking from experience."

"I am."

Andromeda walked into the Hospital Wing, and caught her daughter's eye. "Daphne, why don't you come with me? Tonks will watch over Harry."

Daphne blinked, and then shrugged. "I suppose I could use the fresh air."

Andromeda smiled. "You most certainly could, c'mon Daph," she said, pulling her friend to her feet. Daphne looked longingly back at Harry before she allowed herself to be guided out of the Hospital Wing.

Tonks plunked down on Harry's bed, bouncing slightly. She frowned, and then moved his jet-black hair off his forehead, revealing his scar. She smirked; she knew Harry hated that scar, and loathed displaying it. He thought it was a means of identification and sign of influence to be used only when necessary.

She sighed, leaning back and looking over at him. "You know, you're *really* boring when you're in a coma, Harry. Wake up soon for your big sis, okay?"

---

"How are you holding up?" Andromeda asked, cutting off their conversation about events at the Ministry. Daphne blinked.

"I'm doing alright," she said uncertainly. It was a lie. She knew it, and Andromeda knew it too.

"That's a lie, Daph, and you know it. *Finite Incantatem.*"

Daphne hadn't even seen Andromeda draw her wand. All she saw was her friend's lips press into a thin line as she took in her

appearance, the Glamour Charm flickering out of existence. “Have you been sleeping at all, Daph? Have you been eating?”

“No and no,” she admitted. “I’ve spent most of my time in the Hospital Wing with Harry. I don’t know...it’s just my way of making it up to him.”

Andromeda shook her head. “It wasn’t your fault, Daph, no matter how much you want to believe it was. Harry was possessed by the spirit of a Dark Lord who was also able to draw upon his memories. You’ve had a rough life; there is no shame in reacting the way you did.”

Daphne spun around, eyes blazing. *“I used the bloody Cruciatus on him, Andy!” “What’s he going to think of me after that? Is that normal? Do mothers regularly use Unforgivables on their son?”* she demanded. Her voice was high and hysterical.

Andromeda’s face hardened. “Shut up.”

She stopped walking, and grabbed her friend by the chin, turning her face so that her blue eyes bored into her grey-green orbs with an intensity that made the Grey Maiden flinch. “You didn’t mean for that to happen. You lost control. Don’t let it happen again. You can do that, can’t you?”

“I don’t know,” Daphne replied. “I’ve already lost it three times...”

“Quiet,” Andromeda snapped. “No, Daphne, you haven’t. You knew what you were doing, you felt it coming. Don’t tell me you just ‘lost it.’ Do you remember what that felt like? Do you remember your rage trying to get the better of you?”

Daphne nodded.

“Then you can prevent it. It won’t be easy, nor will it be a guarantee. But you weren’t trying to hurt Harry, Daphne. Yes, you hurt him. Will he forgive you? I can’t answer that. What I can tell you is that you still love him, and unless I’m very much mistaken, he’ll still love you. I’m no fool, Daphne. You mean more to Harry than anything in the entire

world. Think about what happened to him...and *don't* blame yourself for it," she added, as guilty feelings began to well up again.

"It's hard," Daphne admitted her voice breaking.

Andromeda's expression softened. "I know it is, but you can't live in the past, in 'what ifs.' You made your choice and you're willing to deal with the consequences. That's enough, you aren't the only one that needs healing; Harry's going to need it."

"I hadn't forgotten."

"I think you have." The hard quality to her best friend's voice had returned. "You won't do Harry any good if you are haunted by your own demons. You need to eat. You need to sleep. You need to stay in shape, if for no other reason that to keep Harry's world stable," she said, driving the words into Daphne's consciousness as only she had the ability to do. "And Nymmy could use a dueling partner," she added as an afterthought.

"Alright," Daphne said, taking a deep breath.

"He's safe right now, Daphne. You'll always be close by. But you can't neglect your own life. It's as important to him as it is to you."

---

"Still here, Dressler?" Severus Snape asked in a silky voice as he entered the Hospital Wing, carrying a tray of potions. He walked over to a cabinet and began to place them inside.

"What's it to you, Snape?" Daphne replied, not looking up from the Daily Prophet. Harry had been starting to move, to shift around in his bed. However, the actions still didn't bring comfort. It was likely that he was suffering from nightmares. Still, it meant that the day was approaching when he would regain consciousness. He might need some help, though. Dumbledore thought so, and was searching to find a spell or ritual to bring him out of it.

*The only concern is how sane will he be if we yank him out of it.*

"I assure you, I have no care for you or your ward...though I do think it rather pathetic the way you've been wallowing in your misery. I see I was correct when I guessed you were wearing a Glamour Charm."

"How observant, Severus," Daphne replied scathingly. "Yes, I was. Now, I no longer see the point."

"Killing yourself is not going to help him," Snape said, his tone quite serious. "You are a human being. You need to eat and sleep."

"I've been doing more of that lately, Snape. Andromeda has a way of convincing people."

"I'm only pleased she made you see sense," Snape replied icily. "I am an even more sensitive Legilimens than you, and you moping around, as you have been, is bloody depressing. Perhaps Potter will forgive you, perhaps he won't. You can ask him *when* he awakens. It's rather pointless to think about it before that point."

"And what do you know about love, Snape?" Daphne asked sharply, looking up for the first time. "Has anyone ever loved you?"

Snape looked taken aback. "And why should I answer that question?"

"Because it's rather simple," Daphne explained, as if she was talking to a toddler. "Has anyone ever told you they loved you before?"

"My mother, Eileen, certainly cared for me. My father thought me an annoyance," Snape said coldly, bitterness in his voice. "My mother was an idiot for marrying that Muggle trash. He beat her, did you know that? Took away her wand. My mother could not perform wandless magic."

"That makes three people I now know married Muggles. Only one of them has a happy marriage."

"I have no idea what that comment was meant to accomplish. You're with Dumbledore and his Muggle-loving crusade, are you not?" Snape asked, a hint of confusion in his voice.

"Muggles are no different than wizards, Snape," Daphne replied. "Some are good, others are bad. Lily's relatives are bastards. I'd die before I let Harry live with them."

"As much as I'd like the son of James Potter to suffer--"

"He really isn't, you know."

"What?" Snape asked.

"He really isn't the son of James Potter," Daphne explained. "Biologically, he is. But can you honestly tell me you see any hint of James Potter in Harry's personality, outside of his flying ability? Was James Potter even half-decent at Potions?"

"Potter," Snape said, hissing the name through his clenched teeth, "was horrific at Potions. Lily was excellent."

"Ah yes, *Lily*," Daphne said. Snape's face darkened. "You were in love with her, too, weren't you, Severus? A Muggleborn no less?"

"I won't deny it, seeing as you already know, Dressler."

Daphne got up from her seat. "She never felt anything of the slightest for you, you know. Certainly not after the *incident* sixth year..."

Snape flinched. "I've explained that."

"Not very well," Daphne said, striding towards him with a purpose. "Why did you do that to Lily, Snape?"

"You know why," Snape replied irritably.

"Perhaps." She moved over so that she could whisper into his ear. Snape looked revolted but didn't move.

"You had just better hope that Remus or Harry never find out. I won't stop them," she whispered. "We all have our secrets, don't we, Severus."

With that, Daphne Dressler strode past a baffled Potions Master. With one last disgusted glance at the woman's unconscious ward, Snape

departed for the dungeons, hoping to brew some potions and get his mind off his rretched past.

---

A/N: So, now I hope its a bit more evident how an eighteen-year old Daphne O'Connor was able to torture a pair of people into insanity.

While that was unusually gruesome, I won't be holding back in my description, especially once war breaks out. Remember Mr. Sherman: War is Hell. Death Eaters as well as Aurors can commit inhuman acts when under pressure. So can Harry.

If you haven't guessed yet, my favorite alternative narrators are Minerva and Hermione. Both are intelligent, observant women who don't miss much. Ginny's not quite there yet.

Remus will be the star of the next chapter. Lots of flashbacks in that one. I've already started writing it.

Scholars of WWII will know that I'm poking fun by using the Pas-De-Calais and the Ruhr Valley as battle sites. You also got to know about my take on the war with Grindelwald. JKR doesn't explain it, so I can do whatever the hell I want with it. That's why writing AUs is so fun.

'Knights of Walpurgis' was the name of the Death Eaters before they became the Death Eaters, according to JKR.

I hope you liked Andromeda breaking up Daphne's pity party. Somebody needed to make her see sense. Yes, they are very good friends. Andromeda's a no nonsense, relatively laid back kind of woman, while Daphne's wound up like a spring.

What did Snape do to Lily? You'll find out eventually.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

PS. So, Tank, is Daphne still a borderline Mary Sue?

## Chapter 2: Creature of the Dark

“You’re staying overtime, Lupin?” George Wallace asked of his bartender. Wallace had employed the werewolf at his small establishment in Cairo for just under a year. He was sympathetic to the man’s plight, his sister had been bitten when she was just eight years old. Having been fairly sickly to start out, she had not survived her first transformation. Wallace knew that Lupin had received the bite even earlier, and when human, was as humble and harmless a man as existed. He was also a hard worker and had fallen on hard times when a previous employer had discovered his ‘affliction.’

“If that’s alright with you,” Lupin replied. “You know how much I need the extra money.”

“I’m fine with it,” Wallace replied. “What do you plan to do?”

“Clean the glasses, fix up the place. Maybe we could open up early tomorrow? Say...nine o’clock?” Lupin suggested. Wallace smiled. “Why not? You’ll get your overtime pay, but I don’t want you using that wand to clean the glasses. You’ve missed dirt and such before, and I’ve gotten complaints.”

Lupin shrugged. “Sorry about that. My wand’s very good for pretty much anything but household charms.”

“...Which is why I want you doing it the old fashioned way. Do a good job and you’ll get your pay,” Wallace explained, making it clear that there was no room for debate. “You’re a good man, Lupin, and I’m just sorry for the others who judge you based on who you are once a month. But I don’t have much here, and if we’re to compete, the place has to be clean enough to eat off of.”

Lupin nodded. “I’ll do it. Goodnight George.”

“Goodnight Remus. Just tell me tomorrow how late you stayed, I know you’ll be honest. Do get to sleep at some point, though, you’re looking a bit peaky. How long ‘til the full moon?”

“Three days,” Lupin replied tiredly. “I’m barely recovered from the last one.”

"Where do you go to transform anyway?"

"Oh, I found a nice place way out in the desert, near one of the pyramids. I can Apparate there, and I don't stray that far, especially when I can't smell prey," Lupin explained.

Wallace tipped his hat and left.

Remus John Lupin sighed and pulled out one of the glasses and a dishcloth. He liked his new employer, but he'd certainly fallen a long way, all because of who he was. *Imagine that twelve years ago Sirius and Daphne were trying to get me a commission with the Aurors. Look where I am now...*

Remus finished cleaning the glass and set it aside, before pulling down yet another one. He'd been here for longer than he cared to remember. His life had consisted of drifting ever since he arrived in Egypt, ever since he lost all of his friends. Ever since he became the last of the Marauders. Peter was dead. Sirius was a traitor and imprisoned, or worse than dead. James was dead. Even the two unofficial Marauders (who would hate to be associated with their deeds), Daphne and Lily, had suffered. Lily was dead. Daphne...

He did not actually know what had become of the haunted young woman. He wasn't sure he wanted to know, either.

It had shocked all of them that night when Sirius Black had entered the cottage on the outskirts of Godric's Hollow, his eyes wide and his face pale.

---

*"Padfoot, what happened?" James Potter asked, staring at his friend in shock. Lily was standing on the stairs, her lips pressed into a fine line. Her baby son was gurgling in her right arm.*

*"Edmond Dressler is dead," the Auror said, in more than a bit of a daze. "Just came from there."*

*Remus glanced over to see Lily's reaction. Her face was pale, her eyes wide. She was leaning against the wall of the staircase, Harry*

*clutched tighter in her arms. “Daphne..?” she whispered, her eyes glistening.*

*Sirius looked like he’d aged a decade. “She’s alive, we think...but that’s not really important at this point.”*

*Lily’s eyes flashed. “What do you mean it isn’t important?” she snapped. “Daphne is my best friend. Is she or is she not okay?”*

*“I...don’t know, Lils,” Sirius said, leaning against the doorframe. “She wasn’t there.”*

*Lily strangled a sob. “You’re looking for her?”*

*Sirius flinched. Without looking at any of them, he said, “You’d better hope we don’t find her...”*

*“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” James demanded. “What did she do?”*

*“I still don’t believe it,” Sirius said, “I still can’t believe she did that.”*

*“Did what?” Remus asked. Sirius walked forward, and sat down hard in one of the chairs, muttering to himself.*

*“DID WHAT?” Lily cried hysterically.*

*“Killed five people. They might have been Death Eaters...but Merlin, couldn’t she have hit them with the Killing Curse and been done with it?” Sirius asked, more to the room than to any of the people inside it. He buried his head in his hands, rubbing at his eyes. Remus glanced over at Lily. She’d completely frozen. Even Harry had quieted, as if he understood the magnitude of what Sirius had just said.*

*“Padfoot, just explain the whole thing,” Remus advised. “Tell us anything you can, and in order.”*

*Sirius cleared his throat. “We got called in late...again. Voldemort’s found ways to jam the alarm wards, I’m not sure if they are of any use anymore.” Remus knew that the Prewetts, the McKinnons, the Bones’s, and of course, Daphne’s family, the O’Connor’s, had been*

*failed by Moody's system. Of course, it had also saved a number of lives, allowing the Order to know immediately if one of their members was being attacked. The Longbottoms owed their lives to the system, as the Order had arrived just in time to fight off an attack led by Antonin Dolohov. "...so when we got there, it was all over..."*

*Lily waved her arm, as if prompting him. He looked up at her, and took a deep breath. "We didn't actually find Edmond's body, but the wards on the house had collapsed, so we knew he was dead."*

*"And how do you know that Daphne isn't a prisoner?" Lily demanded. "What if she's being tortured right now?" The redheaded woman had always been extremely protective of her best friend, just as Daphne would die to protect Lily. They'd gone through a lot together, and Lily had helped Daphne heal after she'd watched and heard her family brutally tortured and murdered, while having her little brother die in her arms, all at the tender age of fifteen.*

*"We don't. But if she is, I'm not sure how. She killed five Death Eaters, and we found blood from Antonin Dolohov, Thomas Avery, and Trevor Yaxley," Sirius explained. "That's eight Death Eaters. Even as good as Daphne is, I doubt Voldemort would send eight to deal with two targets." He added as an afterthought, "She got Rosier...or should I say splattered him," he added in disgust. "Couldn't stop at decapitating him, had to shred his body into little bits. There wasn't much left of two other Death Eaters, probably new recruits. Oh, and she got one of her parent's murderers, Alan Wilkes...but she was throwing Severing Curses around like Confetti. And some really Dark torture curses, by the looks of it. I'm not even sure how she knew them...."*

*"I don't understand," Lily said. "That's horrible, but she'd just lost her husband. You know what happens to her when things like that happen." Daphne's friend had apparently ignored Sirius's last statement. She was looking around, waiting for someone to tell her that it was a bad joke.*

*Sirius got up and looked her straight in the eyes. "Lily, the place stank with Dark Magic. I could sense it. Moody could sense it. Scrimgeour was practically suffocating from it."*

*"Rufus was there?" James inquired. Sirius nodded. "The Aurors got called in before the Order. Daphne blew up half the house while she was massacring the Death Eaters. A nearby family called it in. Squibs," he added by way of explanation.*

*"I don't believe it."*

*Remus turned to Lily, who was sobbing silently, tears streaking down her face. "Lily, you might just have to accept...we might have lost her. We always knew that there was a risk of her snapping, falling into the Darkness. This might just have pushed her over the edge."*

*"I know," the redhead whispered. "I just...Daphne..."*

*James took Harry from her arms, and handed the baby to Remus. Then he pulled his wife into his arms, whispering words of comfort. Remus looked down at the green-eyed baby with a tuft of jet-black hair. Her eyes shone with innocence, and he gurgled softly. Were we all this innocent as babies? Remus asked himself.*

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Remus sighed as he remembered that night, and began cleaning another glass.

*Whatever became of Daphne? Did she recover, rediscover the light? Did she go too far, end up in Azkaban? Did she die mopping up the rest of the Death Eaters? Or did she leave the country and start a new life?*

Again, Remus did not know. And once more, Remus was not sure that he wanted to. He picked up the dishrag and cleaned yet another glass. He set it down on the counter, then pulled a bottle of firewhiskey from beneath the counter. His employer had said that, within reason, his employees could help themselves to any food or drink they needed. Remus wasn't going to abuse that, and poured himself half a glass.

He stared at the amber-colored liquid for a moment, then downed in one motion. It burned as it went down his throat, but Remus immediately felt more relaxed, even if the alcohol hadn't actually

entered his bloodstream. Remus had never touched alcohol before he came to Egypt. He started when the memories became too much. Still, he was careful never to abuse it, to use it merely to relax and get a quick buzz instead of drowning himself in it. The rigid self-discipline he'd taught himself as a result of his Lycanthropy did just that.

That hadn't been all the bad memories, though. There had been the argument, one month later, just days before Lily and James would die at the hands of Voldemort, and Harry would become the Boy-Who-Lived That had forced Remus to flee England. It had made him doubt who he was, and still worse, made him doubt his friends.

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*When Remus had walked into the room, he knew something was wrong. His first indication was that James had walked over and whispered something in Lily's ear. His wife had been feeding Harry, and she frowned at him, then angrily whispered something else back, hazarding a glance at Remus, who stood there, unmoving. She frowned again at her husband, but picked up her son, kissing him on the forehead. "Let's go upstairs, Harry. I'll read to you again." She disappeared up the stairs.*

"Let's get this over with, Remus," James said, his voice uncharacteristically cold. Remus also recognized that James didn't use his moniker. "You know that there is a traitor within the Order."

"Of course I do," Remus said. "The Bones's are dead because of him."

"And so is Edmond Dressler," James said. They hadn't heard anything from the man's wife since she disappeared. Lily had finally given up hope, though her eyes glistened when Daphne's name came up. Under normal circumstances, she wouldn't have jumped to such a quick conclusion. But she had to put the welfare of her family first.

"What's your point?" Remus asked, suddenly feeling very nervous. He had a bad feeling about this conversation. James was pacing now, as if fighting himself to say something he didn't want to. "Spit it out, James," Remus barked with surprising fury. James looked up.

*"Look, well...I don't know how to say this..." James said, running a hair roughly through his hair.*

*"Then don't sugarcoat it," Remus suggested, "just spit it out, you won't be able to fool me anyway."*

*"Moody thinks that you're the spy," James said quickly.*

*It felt like he'd been clubbed over the head. "I'm not," Remus said quickly. "You know I can't be. How could I betray you, or Sirius, or Peter? You were the first friends of my own age I had! Mother was never the same after Father was killed by Greyback."*

*"I know that, Remus, but that's just the problem."*

*"I'm a werewolf," Remus said through gritted teeth. He let his hands fall to his sides. "I don't believe this. I can't believe you would do this to me. How could you do this to me?" he demanded.*

*"Moony-"*

*"Don't 'Moony' me," Remus snarled. James's eyes widened with fear. "For Merlin's sake James, I'm not going to attack your family! Full moon is a week away, and I'm not that angry anyway! I'd never hurt any of you."*

*"...unless you didn't have any control over it..." James mumbled. Remus stiffened, his eyes narrowing.*

*"What did you say..?" Remus said slowly.*

*James looked up. "What? It's true? You'd kill your own mother if you were transformed!"*

*"My mother is dead, James, she doesn't need killing," Remus snapped sarcastically. "And I'm all too aware that that could happen..."*

*James gave him a look full of sympathy and pity. It made Remus's blood boil. "Look, Remus...we want you to stay away from us...just for a little while. We need to be sure..."*

*Remus growled, a sound more animal than human. “So that’s the way it’s going to be, James? You are turning on me, not because you don’t trust me, but because of something I cannot control. You are no different than any of the bigots at the Ministry.”*

*James looked taken aback. “No, that’s not what I meant.”*

*“So you don’t trust me? After all we’ve done together, everything we’ve been forced to survive in this bloody war, you are going to turn on me, just like that?” Remus snarled. “I hope you’re proud, Potter.”*

*“Remus, Harry’s important. Very important. He needs to be protected, and I can’t take any chances. If I’m wrong, as I think and hope I am...”*

*“Important? James, he’s a child. How bloody important can he be? Is this why you’re here, in hiding? Why?” Remus asked.*

*“I can’t tell you that, Remus,” James said. “Only Lily, Dumbledore, and I know.”*

*Remus just stared.*

*“Remus, I’m sorry about this,” James began. Remus advanced on him, eyes flashing. They flicked to the staircase that led to Harry’s room, where Lily was undoubtedly reading him stories of dragons and wizards. “Don’t you dare,” he warned. “Don’t you dare bring her into this! How could you threaten my family?”*

***“I’M NOT THREATENING YOUR BLOODY FAMILY, POTTER! IF I WANTED TO RIP LILY TO PIECES AND USE HARRY AS A CHEW TOY, I WOULD HAVE DONE IT A LONG TIME AGO!” Remus roared, completely losing his temper.***

*James was pale as a sheet. “Go. Leave. Now.” He drew his wand, his arm shaking, and aimed it at his friend. “Leave, werewolf,” he hissed.*

*Remus felt the urge to rip the man to pieces, but fought it. James suddenly looked absolutely horrified. His wand arm dropped to his side, and Remus thought he saw tears in the man’s eyes. “Oh Merlin, Remus, I’m so sorry...I’d never...”*

*“You’re right, you’ll never,” Remus barked. “Because I’m leaving. And I’m not coming back.”*

*“Remus...” James said, practically begging. “I was so stupid. I trust you. I know you wouldn’t betray us. I’m sorry for being such a prat....”*

*“You were more than that,” Remus hissed. “Goodbye, James.”*

*“Remus...”*

*Remus strode out the door, looking back just long enough to see Lily standing on the stairs, a look of shock on her face. Harry was gurgling again.*

*It was the last sound he heard before he slammed the door on his former friend, and left Godric’s Hollow for the last time.*

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Remus felt wetness on his cheeks, and was surprised to realize that he was crying. He had relived this memory often in his twelve years in Egypt. It was a memory that brought back feelings of betrayal, loneliness and despair. It also brought up feelings of regret and guilt. It had taken a long time, but he had finally learned to understand why James had behaved the way he did. It was true that werewolves were joining Voldemort in packs. James did not want to believe it, but he was scared to death for his wife and son.

Remus knew that he probably would not have behaved much better if he had been in the same situation. If the safety of your family came first, you could not afford to take risks. Even if that ‘risk’ was your best friend.

But now James was dead. So was Lily. He was the only one left, save Daphne.

It seemed like a lifetime ago when he had first come to Hogwarts as a lanky twelve-year old hiding a terrible secret. He had had no friends at all during the first month or so. Then, after James and Sirius pranked him, suspending him in mid-air from the ceiling of the Gryffindor Common Room, the two took pity on him and cut him down

before anyone could see him. They also tried to become his friends, and he caught on quickly, even though he was the most studious of the group.

It had been the first year that Albus Dumbledore had been the Headmaster of Hogwarts. Armando Dippet, who had been Headmaster for far too long, had finally been forced into retirement by the Purebloods and the Ministry. Albus was a Light Sorcerer, having been trained under a number of Masters who spent most of their lives living as hermits, training those who sought them out, but having no wish to play power games any longer. Albus was different. The victor of the War against Grindelwald had returned changed; less brash, less overconfident than he was before. He was extremely forgiving, and also much more tolerant. Remus had been shocked when he received his Hogwarts Letter. He thought it was a joke. His mother, who had been nearly broken after his father had left them, was overjoyed.

It had been soon after he had become friends with the pompous pureblood James Potter, the ridiculously juvenile pureblood Sirius Black, and the whimpering, weak Peter Pettigrew. *Of course, I'm looking back on them with an adult's hindsight. I thought nothing of the kind when I befriended them. But the truth remains. I was a fool. We all were, carefree in our innocence.*

It was soon after that he had been introduced to the two young girls who acted as an opposing force to the Marauders throughout all of their days at Hogwarts, along with their friends. While James, Remus, Sirius, and Peter might have represented chaos, Daphne O'Connor and Lily Evans represented order and stability. Daphne would sooner gnaw off her own arm than be involved in a childish prank. Lily was quite as opposed, but the fact that James Potter was mooning after her from the end of second year drove her to hate the Marauders. Daphne encouraged that. *is it that both women would eventually date a Marauder, and one of them marry one?*

James had married Lily, of course. The other couple was he and Daphne.

Daphne had been one of the most beautiful girls in the school. From the day she had arrived she was in top physical shape, and often took morning runs around the grounds. She and Lily were at the top of their classes, and also the top of almost every boy's mind. Lily had the disadvantage of being Muggleborn, but Daphne was gorgeous, a pureblood and powerful.

And yet, she showed no sign that she reciprocated any of the male population's affections. It was quite odd, really. She did not even seem interested in any of the boys. When they did have balls or dances, she would either go with Lily, or, when her best friend chose to go with a boy, (which earned the unfortunate male death glares from James Potter,) she would go alone. However, if one tried to make a move on her, they were often carrying ugly hex marks for the better part of the next week. She soon gained a reputation as a girl you *didn't* want to mess with. That reputation also raised an umbrella over Lily. Most of the purebloods were of the opinion that Muggleborns were 'easy.' Not so with Lily.

So it had been an utter shock when, in a spur of the moment decision, Remus Lupin had asked Daphne O'Connor to go to Hogsmeade. Daphne looked up, smiled, and said she would be happy to. Remus had had a bit of a crush on the girl, and could not believe his luck. Sirius cast him vicious glares the whole week; he was smitten by Daphne and she wouldn't give him the time of day, which made her practically the only girl in the school resistant to his charms. When he'd asked her out (by pursuing her around the school, trying to harass her in accepting), she'd hit him in the face with a Striking Curse, breaking his nose.

Sirius had been like that: tall, dark, and handsome; *extremely* popular among those of the opposite sex. He hated his parents and clashed with their Dark heritage. They made their feelings known by fawning over his brother, Regulus, leaving Sirius to his own destiny. The younger Black had been one of the top duelists at the school, and had the *capability* to excel in all other area, but not the *will* to put in all the necessary work. Still, he could put out an amazing effort when he felt like it. He was also capable of inventing new charms, a must for pranksters. He impressed all the girls, and must have had about fifty

companions for Hogsmeade weekends, and snogged about half of those girls.

Daphne was an enigma for Sirius, just as Lily was for James. The difference was, Lily wouldn't hex James, she would simply scream at him and threaten to hex his...nether regions. Daphne would hex a person in a heartbeat. Of course, she always chose the right moment, when she and the target were alone and she was sure the target would not tell a teacher and get her detention.

And as James and Sirius had found out, Daphne's hexes weren't simple Jelly-Legs or Furnuculus Curses. They were painful.

Remus sighed as he began sweeping out the bar, wishing he could use his magic and finish the menial task. But with his wand, he'd likely blow up the bar before he cleaned it. He'd have to get the thing looked over at Olivander's if he ever got back to England.

Their date had been, well...not a date. Daphne had shown up wearing blue robes that covered pretty much everything of interest, a far cry from the fairly revealing Muggle outfits that some of the other girls wore. Most of them seemed extraordinarily jealous of Daphne, perhaps because she had such a great body and loathed to show it off. Remus had worn long robes as usual, to disguise his werewolf scars. Not from his transformation; werewolves healed extremely quickly without scarring, but from the night he had been attacked by Greyback. He had been bitten twice and scratched several more times.

They had enjoyed their time together and Daphne had even allowed Remus to kiss her on the cheek and hand, but nothing had come of it. Remus had been convinced his crush was just that, a crush, and nothing more.

Even if Remus had felt something more, he was not sure he could have gone any further than that. He had loved, before, but lost her. Somehow he was glad that he had never really gotten close. It made it easier to lose her, to convince himself that it would not have worked anyway.

In addition, Daphne's eyes had occasionally drifted to where Edmond Dressler sat with his Hufflepuff girlfriend. It was almost imperceptible, but Remus could sense when his partner was uncomfortable. His heightened senses included smell, and humans gave off certain odors depending on what mood they were in. It was rather useful at times.

Daphne appeared somewhat alarmed when Remus had asked her if everything was alright. He'd later learned that it had been that question that started her research into finding out what he was.

Of course, in that area, the fourteen-year old girl who would become the Grey Maiden had been beaten. It had been Sirius Black, James Potter, and Peter Pettigrew who had discovered his secret first. They'd confronted him. It had been one of the most unnerving events of his life, knowing that his wonderful friendships might hang in the balance. What had shocked him to the bone was when James had asked if Remus might like company when he went into the Shrieking Shack each full moon. They had begun their research into becoming illegal animagi that night. A year later, James and Sirius could transform. Peter managed it halfway through 5th year.

However, on the heels of their discovery, Daphne and Lily had confronted him in the library, and Remus had reluctantly admitted his 'condition.' But that was not the most alarming thing, Daphne admitted she had not thought of the idea on her own; a Slytherin fourth-year, Edmond Dressler, had figured it out from a relatively small collection of clues. He had simply asked Daphne and Lily to confirm it. Both girls said that the boy could be trusted to keep it a secret. Remus, having no choice, had simply nodded and left.

Thankfully, no one had discovered his secret beyond those six. The teachers knew, of course, so that they could plan for him not to be present and explain his absences. But no other students knew, and if a number of them found out Remus could be expelled, and Dumbledore would be sacked for allowing him there in the first place. The Headmaster had taken great risks to help Remus in the past, risks for which Remus was forever grateful.

Remus sighed, putting the broom aside. His job was complete. He stored away the glasses in the cupboards, locked up the bar and walked into the Cairo night. It was quiet and dark, the streets lit only by a few Muggle streetlamps. A few people wandered here and there, but the city of Cairo did not have an active nightlife. He wandered down the streets, heading for his small, one-bedroom apartment about a half-mile from the bar. He would have Apparated, but he needed some fresh air to clear his mind. The firewhiskey he had drank created a light buzzing in his mind, which was relaxing, but a bit annoying, nonetheless. He glanced up into the sky. In the city, it was difficult to see the entire starscape but he could make out a number of the constellations, and, of course, he could see the moon. His eyes locked onto it, as they often did. It was an object of terror and fascination for werewolves. When full, it caused them to transform into inhuman beasts, but the beauty of the shining white orb moved him every other time.

Remus arrived at his small apartment, waving weakly to the Muggle security guard in his fez and jeans, a rather odd combination. The guard returned the gesture, raising a hand sleepily. Remus walked up the stairs, unlocked his door and stepped inside.

The apartment was plain. It had a kitchen, which was lightly stocked with some meats, a carton of pumpkin juice, a little alcohol, and some dry goods. Remus had never been particularly good at conjuring meals, and these were more nutritious anyway. After all, eating conjured food was like consuming magic, and how nutritious could that be?

He headed over to his moth-eaten armchair and sat down, closing his eyes and rubbing his hands over his face. He got up, took a shower, and put on a bathrobe, then headed back to his armchair for some more thinking and reading. His mind was still working furiously, devouring his memories of the past.

He flashed back to his Hogwarts days once again. Only this time, he was remembering the worst experience that the Marauders had shared: The Siege of Hogwarts.

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*The Siege had taken place in 1977, during his seventh year at Hogwarts. The signs had been clear that Voldemort was planning something major; not a single attack had been recorded in the previous two months. Before that, starting in 1974, attacks had become almost commonplace. The Ministry had a critical shortage of Aurors, and was forced to accept lesser-qualified candidates to be commanded by the more experienced wizards and witches such as Alastor Moody. Of course, being under the command of Moody meant you lost your inexperience very quickly. Even Daphne was run ragged by the man, something only made worse when Moody was so impressed that he chose Daphne as an apprentice. Remus wondered to this day whether Moody had taken the step to keep Daphne away from Dark Magic. If that had been the plan, it hadn't worked.*

*The battle had begun in Hogsmeade. It had been a Hogsmeade Weekend, and most of the students had been relaxing. The sounds of war had never met most of their years. With a few exceptions, they were young, innocent and carefree. They believed that it was their parent's war, not theirs. They were just teenagers trying to discover where they fit into the world. Really, only Daphne and a few others had been forced to face the horrors of war.*

*But war had come to them.*

*The Death Eaters had struck without warning. Perhaps the only indication that something was wrong was that a number of students, including Slytherins Severus Snape, Addison Jugson, Alexander Nott, Thomas Avery, Antonin Dolohov, Ferdinand Yaxley, and the Carrows, Alecto and Amycus, were missing. Not all were Slytherins; Yaxley and Jugson were Ravenclaws. Still, no one thought anything of it.*

*The explosions on the outskirts of the village were their welcome to the war. Death Eaters, at least fifty of them, swarmed the village, setting homes and businesses on fire and sending students scattering in all directions. Very few of the students could execute anything more complicated than a Disarming Charm. Daphne's legend began there, that day. The fact that she decapitated a Death Eater that was torturing a third year didn't fully register until much later. It was her first kill. Many more would follow.*

*Sirius, Remus and James tried to help protect the younger students as they tore up the path to the castle, which was a full half-mile away. Many would have died had it not been for the bravery of some of the upperclassmen, including the Marauders, Daphne, Lily, and a number of others, including Frank Longbottom and Alice Duran. It wasn't so much that they were able to defeat many of their adversaries, though Daphne killed one and left a number of others severely wounded. That day, they finally saw the product of Daphne's long hours of training. Many of her classmates had a newfound respect for the enigmatic girl. It was that the Death Eaters, a number of whom Remus believed to be his own classmates, (though he could never prove it,) were shocked by the resistance they met. The Battle of Hogsmeade was brief, more of a running battle than anything else; only six students were killed during the melee. Once they were safely back inside the wards of Hogwarts, they learned just how bad the situation had become.*

*Dumbledore had gathered the prefects. Two were missing: Severus Snape and Ferdinand Yaxley. James and Lily, the Head Boy and Girl, were also in attendance. Dumbledore had addressed them gravely.*

*"You are the leaders of the student body," he said. "Thus, you shall be the first to be informed of the situation. Lord Voldemort has encircled this castle. He has at least one hundred of his followers, possibly many more. He has also brought many of the magical creatures that serve him."*

*"What kind of creatures are we talking about?" Edmond Dressler, a Slytherin Prefect asked.*

*"I have seen trolls, but no giants, yet," Dumbledore said. "Unfortunately, we cannot receive help from the Ministry. I have advised them not to come until it is safe."*

*"I don't understand," Lily said, "Why can't we summon the Aurors?"*

*"Because Voldemort isn't stupid," Daphne said. She was rather pale and looked exhausted; Remus thought it was a combination of magical exhaustion and the knowledge that she had killed someone. Even after what she'd gone through two years earlier, she was still innocent in that regard. Now, she was a killer. "He'll have set up Anti-*

*Apparition Wards that will force the Aurors to apparate in a given area where he can cut them to pieces.” She then patted her friend on the shoulder, as if trying to make sure that Lily didn’t take offense to the way she spoke to her.*

*Dumbledore looked appraisingly at the blond-haired girl. “Precisely, Daphne. I must admit that I’m impressed you knew that.”*

*“It was one of Grindelwald’s favorite tactics. It makes perfect sense, in order to cut off a fortified position from rescue. Of course, it depends on the power of the wizard casting it and the amount of men you have to cover the gaps. If you are spread too thin, the Aurors could advance right through the lines even with the wards.”*

*Dumbledore nodded. “We are on our own.” The looks on the faces of the Prefects and Heads was that of desperation and despair. “It will be a difficult battle, but I may be able to use Hogwarts’ power to drive off Lord Voldemort.”*

*“But..?” James prompted.*

*“It may or may not suffice. Unfortunately, I have only been Headmaster for seven years, as long as a number of you have been here. I have explored the wards a great deal, but much of them remains a mystery. I can consult the portraits you see on the walls, those of the former Headmistresses and Headmasters, but the magic of the wards changes with the Headmaster,” Dumbledore explained. “We will have to repulse a number of attacks, I fear. Lord Voldemort wishes to win the war with this strike.”*

*“Who will be fighting?” a Gryffindor 5th year asked. Jonathon Robbins, Remus thought the boy was called.*

*“No one from below 6th year,” Dumbledore said. “Unless the Death Eaters break through and threaten the younger students. 5th Year prefects, you will take charge of the younger students in the dungeons with Professors Sinistra and Sprout. The remainder of the teachers will be needed to defend Hogwarts.”*

*“So the rest of us...” Edmond Dressler said, trailing off. Dumbledore nodded. “Unless a student simply does not wish to fight, you will be*

*asked to help the teachers repulse any attacks. I am sorry that it has come to this. I will not, however, require any student to lay their life on the line. In addition, I don't want anyone up there who is incapable of contributing. I trust you know the capabilities of your classmates. If there are any that will likely be unable to do anything but pose a danger to themselves and others, send them to the dungeons with the younger students. They will certainly be needed."*

*The prefects nodded. "Good luck to each of you. Some of you may be forced to do what Daphne did today, take the life of another," he said, his eyes glistening with what might have been tears. Many eyes turned to Daphne, who stood there with her arms crossed over her chest, wand sticking out of one hand. Her eyes were hard. Remus was unnerved by the cold fire he saw burning in her eyes. Clearly, she was ready to take revenge for what had been done to her family. Of course, it might be that Daphne simply had more at stake than any of the others present. With no remaining relatives, she'd lived at Hogwarts for two years. This was not only her school, this was her home.*

*They'd grimly explained the situation to the students of their Houses, helped by their Heads of House. Many had cried, others had been terrified. Some of the students were innocent little children who were forced to face the awful reality that they might not come back to their parents. That they might die fighting a war that they did not understand. Remus had slept little the first night, partially because he spent most of his time comforting some of the younger Gryffindors along with Lily, James, and Alice Duran, partially because he simply could not sleep knowing that outside the walls, death lurked.*

*To make matters worse, the full moon was only four days away.*

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Remus walked into the kitchen, his mind racing. He pulled out a bottle of Firewhiskey, and poured himself a full glass. He brought it over to his chair, and took small sips this time, again, trying to avoid becoming seriously intoxicated. It did not matter that the full moon was still three days off. Remus was a dangerous creature, and he

had accepted that fact a long time ago. If he was lax here, he might get lax when it could get someone killed or bitten.

He sat back down at his chair, burying his head in his hands. The battle had been long, and it had been costly. People died, a lot of people. Four teachers perished when Voldemort's followers had stormed the gates. Daphne had killed two more Death Eaters, one in a gruesome death involving a Slicing Curse that bisected his wand and ripped his guts open. Remus could still remember Daphne standing there, wearing dragon-hide reinforced black robes, blood splattered all over her face, a hard, determined look on her face. Lily stood off to the side, her hands over her mouth. James had just stunned a pair of novice Death Eaters. The fact that one of their fellow students had been able to create such carnage was unnerving. No one ever treated Daphne the same way after the three days of hell.

Of course, almost everyone he remembered from the entire event was dead or far away. Some of the last news he had heard had been about the attack on Alice and Frank Longbottom...

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*What about Harry? Remember what Bill told you?*

Remus was jolted by the thought. He had had a conversation over six months ago with one of his regulars. One that made him think about what he'd left behind more than anything else he had encountered in twelve years.

*"What'll it be, Bill?" Remus asked, leaning on the counter across from the redhead man. Bill Weasley was a Curse-Breaker for Gringotts. He wore his red hair long, pulled back into a pony-tail. From his right ear hung a dragon-fang earring. He smiled brightly at the bartender.*

*"How's business Remus?" he asked, leaning back in his seat. "Just some cold water would be good to start, by the way."*

*Remus got him his drink, then looked up. Bill was reading a letter, a frown on his face. "...well I never...certainly wasn't expecting that..." he mumbled. He took a sip of the water, sighing appreciatively as it*

*cooled him off. He eyes remained fixed on the letter. “I don’t believe it,” he said to himself. “Of all people—“*

*“Excuse me,” Remus asked. “What’s going on?...if you don’t mind sharing, of course.”*

*“Oh, it’s fine,” Bill said, frowning at the letter. “I’m not sure how much you know about my family.”*

*Remus smiled. “You talk about them quite a bit when you have...a bit too much Firewhiskey....”*

*Bill blushed a bit. “Well, I’ve got five brothers and a little sister. Five of them are at Hogwarts. My brother Charlie’s a Dragon Handler in Romania. Absolutely nuts, that one.”*

*“I suppose you’d have to be,” Remus agreed, sitting down across from the Curse Breaker. “Dragons are dangerous creatures.”*

*“Sure are,” Bill said. “Mum’s almost as worried about his health as she is about my appearance. She wants me to cut the hair and get rid of the earring. Honestly, what’d I look like then?”*

*Remus shrugged. “I’m not one to give fashion tips,” he said, indicating his worn clothing.*

*Bill chuckled a bit. “So, anyway, I just got a letter from my sister. She’s the youngest in my family, and somehow the two of us have always gotten along really well.”*

*“I suppose it makes sense,” Remus said, shrugging. “You are the extremes of the family. Opposites attract?”*

*Bill took a sip of his water. “Merlin it’s hot outside today. What do you think, 55°?”*

*“At least,” Remus said. “Thank Merlin for Cooling Charms. I don’t know how the Muggles get through it all.”*

*“They’ve got something called ‘air... something,’ can’t remember it at the moment,” Bill said. “My dad’s crazy about Muggle stuff.”*

*“You don’t say?” Remus said, getting himself some water.*

*“Yeah...drives Mum nuts with all the junk he’s got in the shed. He loves batteries; do you know what those are?” Bill asked.*

*Remus nodded. “I’ve heard of them.”*

*“Yeah, they power Muggle things...anyway, Dad works at the Department for the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts, he and his buddy, Perkins...you know purebloods don’t care much for Muggles...anyway, he’s always studying them, trying to find out more about him...I think he’s a bit nuts, personally, but...”*

*“...to each his own?” Remus offered.*

*“I suppose...anyway, Muggles use some machine that takes hot air, cools it off, and then sends it back through these vents. Pretty smart, actually.”*

*“If it works,” Remus said. “So you were talking about your sister...”*

*Bill nodded. “Right, sorry for getting off topic. Yeah, she’s a spunky kid, had to be, to stand up to all those brothers...kinda funny, because Mum’s always trying to make her more into a proper little girl...with no success.”*

*“Sounds like she’s rather conservative when it comes to living,” Remus appraised. Bill nodded.*

*“Yeah, she’s a bit old-fashioned...nicest person you’ll ever meet, though,” Bill said, finishing his glass. Remus summoned the whole jug over and poured both of them a glass.*

*“Thanks mate...anyway, Ginny never took to that real well. And now I find out she’s been Sorted into Slytherin...” Bill waved his arms about to demonstrate his surprise.*

*Remus raised his eyebrows. “I take it you weren’t expecting that?”*

*Bill shook his head. “Our whole family’s been Gryffindor. That’s the Weasleys: redheaded, stubborn, nasty tempers, and Gryffindors.”*

*Remus frowned. "Weasley?"*

*Bill nodded slowly. "Yeah...I guess you didn't know my name before. Do you know my parents or something?"*

*Remus nodded. He had never been close to the family, but both of them had been in the Order of the Phoenix. They'd had multiple children, so they hadn't been that available to serve on missions. Plus, neither of them were accomplished fighters. They were a capable bunch, though. Molly Weasley also had some basic medical training. "I knew them from the war," he admitted. Bill's eyes widened.*

*"I suppose you would be the right age for that, probably younger than them, no?"*

*"Yes, I finished Hogwarts in '77," Remus explained. Bill nodded.*

*"Well, it's a small world...back to Gin-Gin, you'll never guess who she's friends with..."*

*Remus shrugged. "Who?"*

*"Harry Potter, how d'ya like that...Remus, are you okay?"*

*Remus Lupin felt like he'd been hit over the head with a club. Harry. He was at Hogwarts right now, his only link to his past. He hadn't seen the boy in twelve years, and now he found out about him from some guy who was a member of one of the Order families and had been a regular at the bar...*

*"Are you okay?" Bill repeated. "Did you know the Potters or something?"*

*"Oh, I knew them," Remus said quietly, looking into the redhead's blue eyes. "I was his best friend."*

*Bill's eyes widened. "Wow...what are you doing out here?"*

*Remus shook his head. "I really don't know. I've just been...here...go on, what else did she tell you?"*

*Bill frowned for a moment, then looked down at the letter. His frown grew. "...why I ought to...wait til I get home you bloody idiot..."*

*"What's wrong?" Remus asked.*

*"God, kid's always been so thickheaded..." he mumbled. "My brother's being a real prat about it, thinks she's betrayed the family...she's only eleven for Merlin's sake..."*

*"Did she say anything else about Harry?" Remus asked with a little more anxiousness than he intended.*

*Bill gave him a strange, contemplative look, but said nothing. "Well, she says he's a great friend, really bright kid...says he helped her get settled in, get used to being in Slytherin..." He looked up. "Got to say, I'm surprised that there's a Potter in Slytherin, all I ever heard about from Charlie was all the favorable comparisons made between him and James Potter."*

*"Harry's a Slytherin?" Remus repeated in disbelief. "I don't believe it...Wow, I guess there's a lot I don't know about him...then again, I shouldn't have assumed he'd be just like James...but not that the apple would fall that far from the tree..."*

*Bill looked uncomfortable. Cleary, he hadn't expected that talking to the local bartender would turn into a trip down memory lane. A trip which he wasn't participating in. "Why haven't you tried to find him, see how he's doing?" Bill asked confusedly.*

*"I don't know," Remus admitted, rubbing his eyes with his hands. "It just never occurred to me that I might have someone left over there..."*

*Bill got up, obviously uncomfortable. "Well, I'm glad I could...help you there," he said distantly. "I've got to be going." He tossed a few Knuts onto the table. "That should cover it, right?" he asked.*

*"Yeah," Remus said, glancing at the money. "Exact change, thanks...thanks for sharing..."*

*"I hope it leads to something, Remus," Bill said earnestly. He left, leaving Remus to his own thoughts.*

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Of course, that conversation had been over six months ago. And since then, he had not written Harry. He had not tried to find out who he was living with. He had not tried to do anything. He just...

*I can't even explain why. Maybe I'm just scared that I've got nothing left over there. Harry might not know anything about me. I just wish my last conversation with James hadn't gone so badly...he was out of line, but I should have been more understand, Goddamnit! I should have realized how much pressure he was under, cut him some slack. He's not like that, and you know it...remember the look on his face after he told you to leave.*

Remus shook his head, burying it in his hands, rubbing his fingers over his eyes. He had told himself that often in the twelve years he had been here, eventually learning that it was completely useless to argue with oneself about what they should have done differently. What was in the past was in the past. It was over, done with. He could not go back and do it all over again, as much as he wanted to.

Remus was about to retire when his fireplace suddenly flared to life. He jumped, surprised. He was even more shocked when he saw Albus Dumbledore's head floating above the fireplace. Even through the flames, Remus could see that his eyes were twinkling. "Albus?"

"Hello Remus, my dear boy. How has life been treating you all these years?" the Headmaster asked. Remus just stared. "I suppose not too well, by the looks of it. I must admit, I did not expect to find that you'd flown quite so far from the nest."

"I wanted to get away," Remus explained.

"Ah, yes, I suppose you and James did not part on the best of terms."

"That's one way of putting it," Remus admitted. "I just didn't see a reason to come back. I have a life here, even if it isn't everything I've

always wanted. I've got a job, I've got some people to talk with...I just don't have that much to worry about," Remus lied, conveniently omitting the money problems he was having.

"Ah, but I have a proposition for you. Since my first choice has unfortunately turned me down, I was wondering if you'd be interested in the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher for this coming term...or possibly more, if you are interested. I assure you that your Lycanthropy can be kept a secret. In addition, there has been a most wonderful development in the treatment of werewolves."

Remus's ears perked up. "What do you mean? A cure?"

Dumbledore's smile faded a bit. "I'm afraid not my dear boy. But the Wolfsbane Potion is revolutionary all the same. It permits transformed werewolves to keep their minds during the full moon. It also lessens the pain of transformation by eliminating the need to injure oneself to satisfy your bloodlust."

Remus wasn't sure he'd ever heard better news in his life. "How can I get it?" he asked. Then he paused. "Can I afford it?"

Dumbledore had a contemplative look on his face. "Well, as you know...or may not know, a werewolf can only be employed by a private institution with no connections to Hogwarts."

"Then how can you give me the post?" Remus inquired.

"I can offer you free room and board, meals, and of course, the Wolfsbane Potion. Severus will brew it; he considers it a challenge."

"I'd love to do it," he admitted, feeling a little giddy at the prospect. "We'll have to keep my Lycanthropy a secret, right?"

"I'd have to inform the staff, of course. Obviously, Severus already knows, but I don't want the rest of the staff getting too curious and reporting you. If it doesn't appear that you are hiding anything, it will be much less likely. But the students will not know, unless they figure it out on their own. We may have a problem in that event."

Remus wasn't deterred. "Someone would have to point them in the right direction for that to happen. You aren't going to think 'werewolf' when thinking of a list of possible reasons that your teacher is ill."

"You always were the logical one, Remus," Dumbledore said fondly.  
"Are you accepting?"

"Yes, absolutely," Remus said. "I'll need transportation, though. I don't have a valid passport, so I can't access a transcontinental portkey."

"That will be taken care of," Dumbledore said. "Welcome aboard, Professor Lupin."

"I like the sound of that," Remus said, beaming. He frowned. "Who was your first choice, if you don't mind me asking?"

Dumbledore paused. "Ah, yes...Daphne Dressler."

Remus was shocked. "*Daphne..?* I didn't even know if she was still alive."

"Alive and well...or perhaps not, it depends on how you think about it," Dumbledore admitted.

"I don't understand."

The old wizard's eyes were twinkling. "Daphne is Harry Potter's guardian," he explained.

Remus stared. "She didn't fall all the way, then?" he asked with a bit of urgency. "She's back on the side of the Light?"

"She was never a Dark Witch, Remus," Dumbledore said. "She's always served the Light...in her own manner."

"Dumbledore, I don't understand," Remus said, the volume of his voice increasing. "Because the Daphne Dressler I remember was unstable and dangerous."

"She's hardly normal, Remus, but she's close enough. She's been a good guardian to Harry, the boy absolutely adores her."

Remus was not convinced. Daphne could be fairly manipulative when she wanted to be. He didn't think she would ever harm or corrupt any son of Lily Potter, but if she thought she was doing what was right...

"There was an incident at the end of school, Remus," Dumbledore said, gravely. "I suppose you haven't been reading the *Prophet*?"

Remus shook his head. "I can't afford it, I'm in debt as it is...and it just makes me miss my old life."

Dumbledore let out what appeared to be a sigh of relief. "It's a rather complicated situation. Daphne hurt Harry, badly. She didn't mean to—"

"*What?*" Remus demanded. "How can you just brush it off as if it's nothing? That woman is dangerous, Albus, and more than a little disturbed. Can't say I blame her, what with her past, but I want to know what happened!"

"I assure you, Remus, that she adores the boy as much as he adores her, perhaps even more so..." He paused, looking thoughtful, "...where to start...Well, Harry came into possession of a book at the beginning of his second year. A diary, which appeared entirely benign and harmless. Unfortunately, that was not the case..."

Remus nodded anxiously. "Go on..."

"...the diary was a trap. It was a tremendously powerful magical object created by none other than Lord Voldemort, during his Hogwarts days. It contained a magical intelligence that possessed Harry, and used him to let a Basilisk loose on the school, petrifying a number of students. Eventually, I forced Voldemort, or Tom Marvolo Riddle, to reveal himself. Daphne and I went after Harry and Ginny, his friend."

Remus nodded dumbly, "I know Ginny's brother..."

"Ah, really? How is William?" Dumbledore asked.

"He's *fine*...what happened next?" he persisted.

Dumbledore blinked. "Ah, yes. While I killed the Basilisk, it appears that Tom used Harry to fight Daphne. They dueled."

Remus collapsed into his chair. "*Oh Merlin...*"

Dumbledore nodded. "She lost control. Tom had access to Harry's memories, and was able to taunt her with them. It was too much for her to handle...you must understand, Remus. She was under tremendous stress, and it broke her..."

"I'm surprised there is anything left of him," Remus said morbidly. "What did she do?"

"She placed him under the Cruciatus Curse," Dumbledore said. Remus felt the blood drain from his face. Daphne's Torture Curse was feared almost as much as Voldemort's among the Death Eaters for its sheer bite and viciousness. Remus just stared, his mouth open, unable to say anything.

"That's not all, unfortunately," Dumbledore said. "She used a Spirit Banishing Spell to drive Tom from Harry's mind. Unfortunately, Tom had established a number of links, anchors of sorts, to Harry. She ripped them out when she used the spell. Harry was unconscious for two months."

"Two months..." Remus repeated. His mind was numb.

"Daphne took him home yesterday," Dumbledore explained. "He's sane, thank Merlin, but certainly not completely healed. Madam Pomfrey wanted to keep him, but Daphne wouldn't allow it. I actually believe that I am going to bring them back to Hogwarts for at least another week. Daphne needs healing of her own, and I need to know that I can trust her, mentally. Harry's friends will also want to visit him."

"I fully agree with that," Remus said. "I need to see her, to see both of them. I'm not happy about this situation. In fact, I'm downright concerned. I'm not sure Daphne's gotten any better at all."

Dumbledore sighed, and had a sad look in his eyes. “I don’t believe that’s a good idea, Remus. They’ve got enough to deal with as it is. Also, I can’t allow a staff member to have such a close personal relationship with a student. I can make exceptions, but I don’t want there to be any reason for anyone to resent enough to report you to the Ministry.”

Remus felt his heart sink a bit. But Dumbledore’s logic made perfect sense. “Snape’s going to hate me anyway, but I see your point.”

“I had hoped you would. I assure you, that you will see plenty of Harry this school year. I think, based upon what I know of him, that you have a great deal in common. I warn you though, if you try to treat him as a carbon copy of James, you will fail miserably.”

“I’d heard he was Slytherin,” Remus admitted. “I sure wasn’t expecting that.”

“He’s a good boy, Remus,” Dumbledore reassured him. “An excellent student, very mature, a person of integrity and character.”

“What I’m concerned about is that he is *too* mature,” Remus said. Dumbledore gave him a strange look.

“We all are, Remus. He’s been forced to grow up too quickly. I know that you can help him.”

“I’ll do my best,” Remus assured him. “When do you need me to be there?”

“You’ve missed our first two staff meetings, unfortunately. But we have an orientation on the 20th of August that I’d like you to attend.”

“I’ll be there,” Remus said firmly. “Just tell me where to get the portkey.”

“I will owl you with instructions,” Dumbledore explained. “I hope that you might stay for a bit longer than one term...I seem to be having some difficulty finding candidates for the post.”

“We’ll see, Albus.”

The fire went out.

Remus sat back, but despite himself, smiled. No matter how awful the situation with Daphne sounded, he knew one thing. For the first time in twelve years, he had a bright future in front of him.

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A/N: Looooooooong chapter, longest in two books. So, there's Remus. If you haven't guessed, he's one of my favorite characters.

Found out a bit more about the Siege of Hogwarts, and you will learn more from various recollections.

Managed to stick Bill in there. I don't remember where I read that Remus was in Egypt; it might have been canon, or I might have made it up. Anyway, I needed him to find a connection, and Bill was the obvious choice. Bill's another character I really like, and his connection with the goblins could be extremely valuable.

So, Harry's awake and sane. And that's all you know. I'm evil, aren't I?

You also see my take on why Remus would have A) not even attempted to return before this point and B) finally decided to return. I hope you see that the Dumbledore I'm creating is not *that* manipulative or evil and misguided. He's old, pretty wise, but certainly not infallible. He's also extremely powerful.

And now you know why Remus left England is the first place, too.

NOTE: I really appreciate the people that take time to leave nice, thoughtful reviews (positive or negative, I can use both). But I've got to admit, I'm surprised by how few reviews I've been getting. Maybe its because people don't like Slytherin!Harry, maybe its because of the violence and more mature storyline, I don't know. But I really would like to see more...

Thanks again to all that *have* reviewed. But while at this point I'm still churning these out because I'm having fun, I feel more enthusiastic when people are eagerly awaiting the next chapter.

## Chapter 3: One Mind, Many Voices

Harry bolted upright from his latest nightmare, finding the sheets wrapped around him tightly. His sweat-soaked body shivering violently in the cool castle.. He looked around in a haze, trying to find out where he was.

Then he remembered; he was in the Hospital Wing of Hogwarts. He had slept in his bedroom at some point recently, but they had been told by Dumbledore to return, and Daphne couldn't argue with him.

*Daphne...*

It was strange how a relatively short series of events could so shake the foundations upon which his life was built. For the ten years he had lived with her, he loved her dearly, practically worshipped her like a goddess. Then had come the Chamber, and the *Crucio*, and the Spirit Banishing Curse that had torn his mind into shreds and forced him to endure two months of agony. Not physical, though he could still remember the headache he'd had in his half-alive, half-dead state. It had not been true rest because at times he'd been slightly aware of what had been happening.

He remembered, all too clearly, what had happened. Gone with Tom's presence had been the blocks that he'd placed upon Harry's memories. And with those new memories, came the nightmares. Nightmares of attacking Hermione, of placing his wand at Ginny's throat. He remembered attacking Ron and Dean as they stood staring into a mirror with their backs turned. He remembered attacking Lisa Turpin as she checked a spot on her glasses. He remembered seeing Terry Boot's eyes look up in terror, then seeing his body stiffen and crash to the floor.

His imagination was cruel and merciless, though. His fractured mind had been given far too much time to think. Now, he had just awoken from a nightmare of murdering Hermione, reducing her to a shredded mass of flesh. Then, it had ended, just as they all did, with Daphne standing over them, her eyes a cold, blazing grey, merciless and relentless in their gaze. He would writhe, he would scream, he would beg, but to no avail.

She continued to stand over him, *laughing* at his pleas for help.

He did not know if it would ever be the same. It was obvious that Daphne was not going to forgive herself anytime soon. She missed their normal relationship as well. Harry refused to embrace her, scared of making any physical contact. There was also a part of him that got twisted pleasure from denying her what she wanted so badly.

*And here she comes again...*

Daphne came racing into the Hospital Wing. Harry supposed he must have been awoken by his screams. He sat up on his elbows, staring hard at her. Daphne slowed, then approached cautiously. "Are you alright?" she asked, concern evident in her voice. There was a part of Harry that was snarling right now, fighting the urge to pick up his wand and hex her.

"I'm fine," he said, "just another bad dream."

Daphne did not wait this time. She pulled him into fierce embrace. But instead of resisting this time, he relaxed, wrapping his own arms around her waist. He could somehow feel the warmth and protectiveness radiating from her. He felt safe, serene, as if nothing in the world could bother him. It brought tears to his eyes as he realized how much she cared about him. He squeezed her back tightly, the fire in his soul quenched by Daphne's love. He felt her shudder with sobs, and Harry could feel that his own cheeks were wet. "Thank you, Daphne," he mumbled.

Daphne squeezed him tighter, planting a kiss in his hair. "It's the least I can do, Harry. I'm sorry." She let him go, and he slid back onto his bed. "I'm sorry for what I did, and how I made you suffer. I made a mistake, a bunch of them, really. I'm the adult, I'm the one who should be making the right decisions and looking out for you. I failed that task."

"Daphne..." Harry.

"Shhhhhh..." she shushed him, placing a finger on his lips. She looked down on him, love sparkling in her eyes. "Rest, Harry. You still need to heal."

"I know," Harry admitted, rolling over. "I just...I don't know...I'm all mixed up and confused..." His mind was spinning now, trying to understand the massive shift in emotions that he was experiencing.

Daphne looked him in the eyes, and Harry could feel the soft tendrils of her Legilimency probing his mind. He resisted at first, then relaxed, sensing that all she was doing was taking in the state of his mind. She broke eye contact, looking anxious. "You aren't healed," she said. "You're getting there, but things are all out of order. Actually, I'm quite surprised about one thing. Normally, the mind organizes itself into a familiar shape or surrounding that appears when another person uses Legilimency. You had something that I thought resembled a Quidditch Pitch."

Harry nodded. He had never heard of the phenomenon, but it seemed as if Daphne did know what she was talking about. In this kind of situation, Daphne would do all the research into the subject that she could. It both gave her something to do and made her feel as if she was making a difference. Harry thought that it made her feel better to know that she was making progress, preparing herself so that she would understand what was going on and what to do come any eventuality. It was certainly not a waste of time. "And now?" he asked softly.

Daphne frowned. "It looks like a library, just with a lot of things out of order." She gave him a reassuring smile "Trust me, it's much better than it was before. You are getting better, Harry. I'm just sorry that this had to happen in the first place."

Normally, Harry might have reassured her that it was all right and that he forgave her. But in this situation, Harry was unable to say any of those things, knowing that not only would he be lying, but also that Daphne would know that and feel worse for it. "I'm sorry too," he said instead.

Daphne sat down at his bedside. "What are the nightmares about?" she asked, running a hand through his hair in a reassuring manner.

Harry opened his mouth, paused, and then decided he would say it anyway. He was confused and baffled by a great deal of his thoughts that he had had since waking, but he was thinking clearly enough to

know that, again, this was not a time to lie. "About you," he said quietly. Daphne's eyes became dull and lifeless, her face completely emotionless. Harry supposed it was better than if she had broken down crying. That would just make him feel all the more guilty and force more of his doubts to the front of his mind. Perhaps, in time, he might be able to forgive her. That said, he needed her; he was more certain of that than anything else. Daphne was his lifeline, she always had been.

"I suppose I should have expected that," Daphne said in a flat voice. "What I did to you was horrible."

"Yes, it was," Harry agreed. He couldn't deny it. Something began to rattle around in his subconscious like a loose bolt. It was a raw, blazing fury. He was angry with Daphne. He was not mournful that the situation had come to that, or simply wished that it had not happened. There was a part of him that wanted revenge, and wanted it badly. Fortunately, enough of his love for his guardian was left to combat it. *I don't want to hurt her. I can be angry with her, but if I hurt her, I'll just be hurting myself. Because if I know Daphne, she won't be angry at me in the least. She'll think she deserves it, and probably just be angry with herself. I can't launch both of us off the cliff.*

It was perhaps the most rational thought he'd had in three months.

"I'm glad that you're being honest with me, Harry," Daphne said, surprising him. Simply from her voice, he could tell that she was glad in some insane, perverted way. But with the exception of that small pinprick of light, what Harry had just said was the last thing that she wanted to hear. *But I'm going to be honest with her. She hurt me, and I can't forgive her for that... yet. Maybe eventually I will, but as screwed-up as I am, the last thing I need to do is make a promise I have no intention of keeping.*

"I got a letter from Ginny today," Daphne said, jolting Harry out of his mental conversation. "She's in Egypt, remember." The way that Daphne said every word could be best compared to walking extraordinarily gently on glass. She was clearly terrified of provoking him. She'd been beating herself up for two months, and the last thing she needed was rejection.

*But can I give her anything else?*

Now was not the time to be diplomatic, or manipulative. Now was not the time to sugarcoat everything he said, to try to give Daphne exactly what she wanted in the exact phrasing she was hoping for. Now was not the time to be *Slytherin*, in any shape or form.

*It's always taught that 'honesty is the best policy.' I'm not sure if it was intended for mentally unstable thirteen-year-old wizards trying to learn to trust the most important person in their lives again, but it sure as hell makes sense in this situation.*

"Yeah, you mentioned it at some point...how long is the letter?" Harry asked.

Daphne cracked a genuine smile. "It's a long one, but nothing compared to the novel that Hermione wrote you. She wants to visit soon, by the way. Tonks is also chomping at the bit, but she's entering one of the most important phases of Auror school. She might not be able to get away."

Harry lay back, shivering, and Daphne's smile vanished. "Are you alright?" she asked. "I'm not surprised the Dreamless Sleep Potion didn't work; I expect you'll need a more potent variety to handle your dreams."

Harry said nothing. He tried to relax, calm his racing heart. "Do you want me to stay here with you?" Daphne asked. She bit her lip, a quirk that reminded him greatly of Hermione. "Or do you want me to leave?"

"Stay," Harry said. As confused as his emotions were, he still felt safer near her. He didn't understand why.

"Alright," she said. She got up and moved over to the bed next to his. "I'll sleep here tonight," she said. "I'll wait until you are asleep, though."

Harry nodded sleepily. He closed his eyes, and an indeterminate amount of time later, fell into the blissful oblivion of sleep.

---

August 3rd, 1993

Cairo, Egypt

Dear Harry,

*I hear that you are finally awake. It's without question the best news that I've had in ages. I've been really worried about you for two months, and before I say anything else, I want you to know this: I don't blame you. It isn't your fault at all. I won't pretend that I wasn't absolutely terrified, or that I almost died, but I really don't want you to blame yourself. Riddle was older, more experienced, more powerful, and more manipulative than you are. That's why you are Harry, and he's You-Know-Who. Don't feel bad that he managed to control you. Professor Dumbledore said that Tom probably took away memories, and undoubtedly established a very powerful mind link.*

*If anyone is to blame, it's us: me and Hermione. We should have noticed something was wrong, even if you weren't actively crying for help. Between the way you reacted when we found out about the roosters, the fact that I found you unconscious during the sight of the first attack, and in general, how you were always sleeping during the attacks, we should have figured out that something was wrong. Maybe we shouldn't have known that it was necessarily a position, but between the brains of me and Hermione, I don't understand how we missed it all. I know you don't blame us, because you aren't like that, but I won't let myself get out of this without any blame. We messed up too.*

*Merlin, I can't wait to see you, just to see how you are. Daphne says you are sane, thank Merlin, so at least I'll be able to talk to you. It's really amazing how much you mean to me after just one year, but you did so much for me this year, between helping me in school, helping me with my brothers, sharing your own experiences to get me accustomed to Slytherin (I really couldn't have done it without you), teaching me all kinds of advanced magic...you've just done so much...and been the best friend a girl could hope for. I know it sounds like I'm the stupid little girl with the crush again, but it's not*

*like that at all. My crush is dead, buried; yet another thing that you helped me with.*

*Well, I've been in Egypt for the past week or so, visiting my brother Bill. Dad struck gold at the Ministry...literally. He won one thousand galleons in the annual prize draw. We hadn't seen Bill in ages, so Mum and Dad decided to take us there for a vacation. It's been a blast. Ancient Egyptian wizards were very cool, and designed all kinds of wicked traps and such to protect the bodies and riches of their kings. It's Bill's job to break through those curses and enchantments. It's dangerous work; he told me all about some of things that have happened to some of his fellow Curse Breakers. Of course, he's told Mum about none of this. Oh, and Ron and the twins tried to leave Percy behind in the basement of one of the tombs, but Mum caught them. Percy's entirely oblivious as to what their intent was.*

*As for my family, I'm afraid the news isn't that good. Bill's really the only one that wants to give you a real chance. He's always been open-minded and willing to listen to me. He says he talked to someone who knew your parents a while back, a person named 'Remus.' Anyway, he says I should be careful (as if I'm not already), and cautious around you. The only reason I'd do that is to make sure you're okay. I know you'd never hurt me if you had control of the situation.*

*As for everybody else, well, it's a mixed bag. Ron won't shut up, that's really the best way to summarize that part of the situation. He's absolutely convinced that you a malevolent Dark Wizard that's 'seduced me' (his words) into being your friend, just to get close to the Gryffindors. I don't think you'll feel that makes anymore sense than I think it does. Either way, it's been bloody annoying. He keeps saying that he was always right about you. He obviously is in need of a brain replacement. His old one appears to have expired.*

*As for the twins, they're as they've always been, they really don't know what to think. They were very angry with you at first, and pranks would have been the least of your problems next year, but I think I've won them over. Colin Creevey had actually been taking photos of you last year (remember how you called me a groupie? HE is a groupie,)*

*and he gave me some of them. The twins were won over by how happy your photographic self was in them. Normally, as you know, the photos reflect the mood of the person in them. Well, you are clinging to me and Hermione quite often (and both of us like it.) I'm not sure what that means, but it can't be a bad thing, can it?*

*Mum and Dad are confused. You know a bit about my mum, but one thing about her is that she thinks that children are incapable of being bad people. Sure, she'll yell and scream at the twins for pulling some immature stunt or prank, or at Ron for being an idiot, and Bill says she was all over he and Charlie for wrestling a lot when they were younger, but she smother us with love. She's a great mum. So she's confused. She really thinks you are a 'poor little boy' because you are an orphan, and since more information has come out about what happened to you, she really seems just very sad that it happened, and doesn't seem to blame you as much as I thought she would. But she's also telling me to 'stay safe' and 'don't take risks.' Well, I almost died last year (it still scares me to think about that,) so I suppose a little extra concern is warranted. But she hasn't told me to stay away from you, and even if she did, I wouldn't listen to her.*

*Dad is very uncertain, actually, I've never seen him this torn. I think he was very angry with you for hurting his little girl, but always suspected that there was more to the story (he's smart that way; he doesn't make blanket assumptions often.) Obviously, there was. I think he's madder with Professor Dumbledore for letting everything happen the way it did. He wants me safe too...honestly, you'd think I danced around in a meadow of Venomous Tentacles and Razor Grass on a regular basis...*

*Anyway, I'm rambling. I just want you to know that I'll visit as soon as I can. I miss you so much. Oh, as for the school, Professor Dumbledore made a speech in front of the school explaining what happened (sorry if you wanted it kept a secret, but he thought it best; you might want to ask Daphne about it,) and what condition you were in. There seemed to be a fair amount of sympathy. I'm not sure if that's what you are looking for, but that's better than fear and resentment, right?*

*Well, you missed your birthday, so I thought I'd send something. It isn't much, but I found it in one of the markets around here, and Bill says I got pretty good value for it. It's supposed to improve your focus and concentration...even if it doesn't, I still think it looks nice. I hope you like it.*

*Love,*

*Ginny*

Harry put down the letter, a cornucopia of emotions twisting and turning within his mind. *Well, she doesn't seem to have held it against me at all.*

Harry had to admit to himself that he'd been nervous that something like that might happen. Through his newly regained memories, he knew that he had done things to them that made his stomach tighten. He'd tormented and cursed Hermione, using an old Dark curse that was among the most feared and cruel in existence until countermeasures were found to fight it. He remembered various mentions of the Mind Death Curse in his reading about the war, and it was not a pleasant experience to be hit with it. As for Ginny, he'd taken her hostage, placed his wand at her throat, and brought her into the depths of the school to drain her life force. Well, *he* hadn't done that, *Riddle* had...but Harry was thinking in terms of what other saw him doing. That was what was important in this case, wasn't it?

Harry reached into the envelope, and his hand closed around something hard and cool. He pulled it out and held it up to the light. It was a necklace of sorts, a woven string from which hung six black stones, possibly polished obsidian, which increased in size radiating out from the center. They glinted in the light of the morning sun. Harry put it aside for the moment; he wanted to ask Daphne if it might have any negative effects concerning his condition. Harry had one goal at this point: attend Hogwarts with the other students on September 1st. He had a little bit less than a month to put himself back together mentally, do his summer homework (though he had a rather good excuse,) and figure out where everything was going.

Next to Ginny's letter was a book entitled *Mysteries of the Mind: A Guide to Mental Magic*. Obviously, it was from Hermione; she was

always thoughtful in her choice of gifts. Harry hoped that he'd learn more about Occlumency and Legilimancy by reading it; he was always interested in both branches of magic.

Daphne walked into the Hospital Wing, carrying a tray of food. She appeared to have slept fairly well; the dark patches under her eyes were considerably lighter than normal. The expression on her face was that of peaceful serenity. To anyone that knew her, that meant that she was balanced, but not happy. It meant that something was definitely bothering her, so much that she had to make a conscious effort to remain vacant of emotion in order to think logically.

"How are you doing this morning?" Daphne asked, setting the tray down on the nightstand. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," Harry replied truthfully. "I didn't have any nightmares. I think having you here helped." Daphne walked over and kissed him lightly on the forehead.

"I'm glad," she said softly. "I see you found the letters that your friends sent you." Harry handed her the necklace, and she looked at it intently. She pulled out her wand and whispered something. The necklace glowed light blue, then dark green. Daphne's forehead wrinkled in puzzlement.

"What did Ginny say this did?" she asked, hefting the stones in her right hand.

"She said that it was supposed to improve focus and concentration," Harry explained. "She added that she didn't know if it would work, and I got the idea that it wasn't that expensive...do you think it's a bad idea for me to wear it?"

Daphne shook her head, still looking at it. "On the contrary, I think Ginny found something very useful for your situation. This kind of thing will allow you to better center your thoughts and sort out your emotions. That seems to be your biggest problem, no?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "I just...one minute I feel angry about something, the next moment the complete opposite, and overall I'm just confused. I

just have all these random thoughts swirling around in my mind...I'm practically arguing with myself at times."

Daphne took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "That's not..." she paused to compose herself. Obviously, she had realized that he had been talking about her when he explained his confused emotions. "...I'm not surprised," she finally choked out. "You went through a very...difficult and traumatic experience."

Harry was not quite sure how to react. He had never seen Daphne like this, so uncertain and anxious; he simply didn't know what to do. She certainly was not perfect; she had tried her best to make sure he understand that, but at the same time he had never really accepted it. She had always been the person he went to for help. The few times he had not, the results were disastrous.

She had been his role model, his friend, his mother, and his mentor.

And now..?

*I can't handle this. I've never seen Daphne like this before. But I can't give her what she wants. She hurt me.*

*After everything that she's gone through, she's capable of a lot. And you know that she's distraught about it.*

**SHE HURT ME!**

"Harry?" Daphne asked. "Are you alright?"

Harry shook his head, trying to clear out the confusing thoughts. He would tell Daphne the truth if she asked for it, but he would not deliberately try to hurt her. She did not deserve that. *There is a difference between being unforgiving and brutally honest and driving the point home to make her suffer. It's not like I'm adding much to her guilt, she's overloaded herself without my help. Why make it worse?*

"Are you sure you are alright?" Daphne asked. She clearly appeared concerned.

"Is having a conversation with yourself 'alright'?" Harry snapped with far more bitterness than he'd intended. He immediately regretted it. Daphne jerked back as if she had been struck across the face. *I suppose that that is a rather good comparison. It's the equivalent of it.*

Daphne opened her mouth, but said nothing. Harry supposed there was nothing she could say. Guilt started to well up in him. "I'm—"

"What?"

*Sorry, that's what you wanted to say. But that's not true, is it. You suffered weeks of mental agony because she had a bloody temper tantrum and wasn't thinking straight. How can you forgive her for that?*

*I can. It's not all her fault.*

*Bullocks.*

"I'm...just really confused. I just...I don't know, I can't get my thoughts in order. It's like there are a bunch of little Harry's running around in my mind, spewing random opinions and comments," Harry tried to explain in frustration. He didn't quite scream it, but it was loud enough to get the point through.

Daphne looked absolutely devastated. He did not think she could look so defeated, so broken. Her eyes were dull, her body language that of a beaten warrior. She looked lost, confused.

*"Damn it Harry! I'm sorry! I just don't know what to do! I ripped your bloody mind to shreds and I just don't know what to do!"* she cried in despair. She gave a loud, gasping sob and collapsed into the adjacent bed, crying softly.

Harry just stared. Daphne continued to sob, burying her face in the sheets, her pride blasted into kindling, her composure eradicated.

Shame now pressed down upon his mind with the weight of a full-grown centaur. *Are you happy now, Harry? Has she suffered enough for you? Look what you've done to her. You've reduced her to nothing. She can't survive without you, or live with what she's done. When she*

*puts her wand to her temple and ends it all, will that be enough for you? Will she have suffered enough?*

The thought shook him to the core, his blood freezing in his veins. His breathing sped up rapidly, his pulse pounding in his head, deafening him. *She wouldn't...she couldn't do that...*

*Are you really that stupid, Harry? The maddeningly sarcastic voice that sounded oddly like Snape asked him. Are you really that naïve to believe that she isn't at that point? That your existence isn't the only thing that has kept her alive all these years?*

Harry got up. His atrophied muscles protested, but he pressed on. He climbed out of bed and staggered over to Daphne. He collapsed onto the bed next to her. Daphne didn't seem to notice. Harry wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling himself closer. Her sobs lessened, than stopped. She shifted, and Harry allowed her to sit up. She stared at him in complete disbelief.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, meaning it this time. His voice was hoarse. He repeated it, but it came out as more of a choking sob. *How could I have been so stupid, so selfish? Yes, she hurt me. But I love her. I love her more than anything. I can’t lose her, and that’s exactly what’s going to happen if I can’t at least give her partial acceptance.*

Harry felt guilty for moment as he wondered whether or not he was giving in for her sake, but decided that he was certainly doing himself a favor by starting to repair their relationship. She could help him. He needed to let her. He didn’t need to forgive her completely, and he certainly didn’t need to forget what had happened and pretend it never occurred, but he *did* need to bury his doubts and anger for *both* of their sakes. His anger spoke up about being shoved aside, but Harry ignored it. “I’m sorry,” he said for the third time. “I can’t...” he paused, and took a deep breath. Daphne was staring at him as if her life clung onto every word.

He looked into her eyes, not caring if he was potentially triggering her Legilimency. He swallowed thickly. “...I can’t forgive you,” he said. “Not yet. Maybe eventually, I can...” he said. Daphne hadn’t really reacted. Her face was pale, but emotionless. Her eyes were too

clouded to determine what emotion she was feeling. "But I still love you," he blurted out, unable to keep it in anymore.

Daphne held out her arms, and Harry allowed himself to be pulled into her embrace. He squeezed back, even tighter than he had the last time he had found himself in this situation. "That's all I can ask for, Harry," Daphne mumbled softly. "I don't *want* you to forgive me...but I won't pretend that I haven't been waiting to hear those three words since I cast that spell."

They stayed there for a long time. Finally, they broke apart. Daphne gave him a crooked, sad smile. "You really shouldn't be out of bed, you know. Madam Pomfrey would kill me from letting you get up like that."

Harry began to get back up. Daphne helped him into bed. She bent and kissed him on the forehead. She looked into his eyes, and Harry saw more focus and determination in them than he'd seen since he'd awoken. Clearly, while she hadn't forgiven herself, her anxiety over potentially losing Harry forever had abated somewhat. "We'll get through this, Harry. Together."

"I know."

Daphne straightened and left. Harry stared after her for an indeterminate amount of time before he rolled over and took Hermione's book. As he brought it over to his bed, a thick wad of folded parchment fell out, clearly, the 'novel' that Daphne had been referring to.

Harry began to read.

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Harry's recovery was going fairly well. He was finally out of bed, and able to walk around without much trouble only a week after he had awoken. Madam Pomfrey had given him a number of different potions to build up both his physical endurance and strength. The hope was that they would allow him to speed his recovery and have a chance to attend Hogwarts on September 1st. Soon enough, he was able to wander the castle normally, though he tired easily. Madam Pomfrey

would insist that he slept in the Hospital Wing so that she could monitor his progress.

Of course, Daphne was advocating taking him home. She also had improved considerably since they reached a mutual acceptance, her confidence and composure returning. She was training again and simply looked more...alive.

To be perfectly honest, Harry was getting bored at Hogwarts, and was in full support of Daphne's campaign. Various staff members would stop by the Hospital Wing and hold brief conversations, but Harry was simply not in the mood for those kinds of conversations.

No, as much as he liked Hogwarts, it *wasn't* home. And right now, with his thoughts still a jumbled mess, he *needed* to go home.

The other thing that he was waiting for was the long-anticipated conversations with his best friends. Even though he was no longer concerned that they wouldn't forgive him or abandon him entirely, he was still anxious to talk to them in person. It sounded from their letters that they felt the same way. Ginny remained in Egypt, while Hermione was trying to convince her parents to allow her to visit.

One person who had stopped by that Harry had been glad to see was Tonks. She had been very subdued, and seemed worried about possibly appearing *too* euphoric that Harry was finally awake, but she'd entertained him with humorous portrayals of various people, including both physical likenesses and accompanying impressions. Despite his situation, Harry had found it difficult to breathe when she did an imitation of Snape.

Once he'd stopped laughing, the two had talked freely and easily about how Harry's recovery was going, while Tonks talked a bit about Auror training. She explained how they were undergoing the majority of their combat training at the moment, not simply spell work, but also small-unit tactics, how to plan and execute surprise raids, how to fight against superior numbers, et cetera. Harry found the discussion absolutely fascinating.

Tonks had humorously replied, "At least someone does."

Unfortunately, his ‘big sister’ had been forced leave after only a few hours. The Aurors had brought in no less than Alastor “Mad Eye” Moody for a four-day series of combat drills and lectures. The grizzled ex-Auror was known for both his own exploits and for training Daphne, and even Tonks had to admit that if one could get past his revolting appearance and paranoia, you could learn some extremely interesting and useful things.

Daphne had come in later that day, though her purpose was different. She wanted to talk to him about how to proceed in his recovery. The relationship between the two was still tenuous, but much more stable than it had been. Still, the confusing thoughts and lack of composure and control that plagued Harry continued to make him unable to figure out exactly how he felt about the woman. He feared her. He hated her. He loved her. He needed her.

His nightmares were no better than they had been, except a little less clear and a bit more confusing. Something had to give as his mind struggled to rebuild itself. Daphne had talked about the possibility of learning Occlumency, a mental art that Harry had read about in Hermione’s gift. She knew that it would not only protect Harry’s mind from further intrusion, but that it could be used to manage emotions and thoughts and concentrate them into what was useful and what was not. While she doubted that she could finish teaching him the skill, she said that she could ask Snape or Dumbledore to teach him. Harry surprised to find out that Snape was actually the superior Occlumens and Legilimens.

The prospect of potentially having the vindictive Potions Master sifting through his memories and seeking to exploit his worst fears was frightening, but surprisingly, less appalling than Harry would have expected. Harry and Snape had simply not gotten along in his first year. Snape, still seeking revenge against James Potter, (revenge that in some ways was duly deserved,) had instead tried to take it out on his son. He had been livid that Harry was Sorted into Slytherin, taking it as a personal insult, a strike from beyond the grave. He’d belittled Harry and allowed his godson, Draco Malfoy, to harass and hurt the son of his nemesis. He’d attempted to put Harry off-balance by using Legilimency on him.

In general, he had been oblivious to, or ignored, all of the dozens of indications that Harry and James Potter could not be less alike if they tried. Harry had never known his father, and in a way, he felt that his view of the man was heavily slanted towards the negative. Of course, he had heard the positive comments about his father from McGonagall, Hagrid and Dumbledore, all three of whom remembered James fondly. He had seen both the Quidditch Medals and awards, and the polished Head Boy badge on display in the trophy room. Even Daphne, who had certainly not been overly enthusiastic about James, would admit that despite his many flaws, Harry's father was an excellent wizard, a caring person, and a good and faithful husband, though he could also be arrogant, judgmental, reckless, irresponsible and immature. He certainly did not like what he heard about his father from his Hogwarts days.

*It's strange. Everyone talks about his pranks, how he drove my mother insane with his infatuation with her...but then, when they speak of his 7th Year, suddenly he's this reformed man who has learned from all of his past mistakes and become a model citizen...I don't believe that for a second.*

*It really is no wonder that Snape hated me so much. The thought of having another James Potter in Slytherin must have just terrified him. My dad was a real arse to him at school, and while Snape might have been just as vicious, and did eventually join the Death Eaters, my father always had the chance to end it. Seeking revenge is not a virtuous cause. My father and his friends had a choice, and who knows? Snape might not have joined the Death Eaters if my father hadn't given him such a terrible impression of Light Wizards. And based on the fact that my father was very popular, I wouldn't be surprised in the least if the rest of the student body treated him poorly to please James Potter...all of those references to my ego, the comparisons to my father's arrogance...they may have been misguided, but I can hardly blame him. That said, he didn't handle it the way a responsible adult should.*

But things had changed. At least, Harry hoped they had. Part of it, he knew, was his tremendous success in Potions, something that his mother had possessed great talent in and his father had not taken seriously. *I suppose the fact that I'm skilled in the field would really*

*stand out to him. He's a Potions Master, and he's one of the best in the world. His whole life revolves around cauldrons and vials. The differences between James and me would be most obvious there.*

Harry had not had a great deal of outside interaction with Severus Snape, but what he did have was encouraging. The man was cold, ruled by fear and could sneer with the best of them; but he was also intelligent, driven and very sneaky. Rarely did he display any sort of caring, but he believed that the Slytherins were his charges.

Perhaps that had been the strangest thing he had read in the five-foot long letter that Hermione had somehow crammed into the book she had given him. Harry quickly determined that Hermione had not actually written it in one sitting. There were a number of points where she appeared to have stopped, waited several days or possibly longer, and then picked it up again. She repeated herself fairly often, and described in gut-wrenching detail what she had seen and how she had felt when Riddle attacked her. Hermione was trying to either get it out of her system or make Harry feel guilty. The latter made absolutely no sense when compared to the rest of the letter, so it was clear that she was simply getting it out into the open. Either way, it was nothing that Harry didn't know. What he did appreciate was that Hermione was not trying to lie to make him feel less guilty. They had always been honest with each other about most things, and they trusted each other implicitly. Harry could safely say that he had feared losing Hermione's friendship more than Ginny's. It wasn't an indictment of the young redhead, it was simply a function of everything that Harry and Hermione had gone through during their 1st years. Theirs was a special bond, a bond that Harry thought was most comparable to that between a brother and sister.

“*HARRY!*” a shrill, excited, very familiar voice cried out, breaking into his thoughts. *Speak of the devil...*

Hermione crashed into Harry with the force of a freight train, nearly knocking him off the bed. Harry didn't even have a chance to move before his bushy-haired best friend was squeezing him so hard that he could hardly breathe. Weakly, he squeezed her back. Hermione loosened their embrace but didn't let go. The two stared at each other for a moment.

"Hello Hermione," Harry said weakly. Hermione hugged him again.

"I missed you so much," she mumbled softly. She reluctantly let go and sat down on the foot of the bed. Harry sat with his back against the headboard. Hermione bit her lip nervously. "Look, I don't really know how to say this..." she began anxiously. "I'm just so glad you're alright." Harry noticed that Hermione's brown eyes were glittering with unshed tears.

"Well, Hermione, I'm not sure how to tell you this either..." Harry said lamely. He swallowed. "I'm not really 'alright'...I mean, *physically*, I'm recovering well, and should be able to attend Hogwarts with you and Ginny in September..."

"But?" Hermione prompted.

Harry sighed. "My mind is a mess. Confusing thoughts, random urges, alien feelings..." He looked at her helplessly. "We're going to try a few things, namely, Occlumency, but I...I just don't know how long it's going to take. I'm sane, but that's all we really know at this point."

Hermione frowned. "Has Professor Dumbledore thought of anything? And is your mind healing on its own? And what does Occlumency have to do with anything?"

"Well," Harry began, "Dumbledore hasn't really thought of much. He's been trying, obviously, having the Boy-Who-Lived healthy and attending school is very important to his position...not that he doesn't care about my health anyway," he added hastily. "But he really hasn't found anything. I've been given a lot of potions, but I'm kind of a strange case. I'm in between insane and perfectly normal. I'm actually pretty lucky..."

Hermione wasn't convinced at all. "Hearing voices in your head *isn't* normal, Harry."

"I know that," he replied a bit more sharply than he'd intended. Hermione winced. "I just...well, I'm able to do things normally. Yes, I get a bit confused at times, and I still haven't performed any magic..."

"You haven't?" Hermione asked. "Why in the world not?"

"Dunno," Harry admitted, leaning back against the headboard. "I don't have my wand, Daphne has it for safekeeping. She actually had to get it repaired, it got really beat up in her duel with Riddle. It's all splintered and the phoenix feather core is actually a bit worn out. Riddle was feeding a tremendous amount of power into it in a *very* short period of time."

"I didn't know that that could happen to wands," Hermione said contemplatively. "So how have you been doing, other than your health? What have you been up to?"

"Well, I didn't exactly need to learn to walk again, and the Strengthening Droughts that Madam Pomfrey's been giving me have helped with the muscle atrophy, but my endurance is way below what it normally is...physically, at least. My magic's back to normal levels...actually, it seems to be a bit higher than usual. Madam Pomfrey ran some tests, but Daphne didn't seem overly worried...at least no more worried than she already is."

"Well, maybe one good thing will come out of this, then," Hermione said, obviously looking for positives. "Have you had a chance to look through that book?" she asked, indicating his leather-bound birthday present.

"Yes, actually," Harry said. "Unfortunately, like I said, I'm kind of a unique case. I've recovered to a much greater extent than most with comparable mental damage have in the past...the only drawback being that they don't have any precedents to follow."

Hermione nodded. "You said you might be learning Occlumency?" There was still a tenor of anxiousness in her voice. She obviously was not taking the entire situation as lightly as Harry was.

"Yeah, that's something that might help me organize my thoughts. It's not designed for that kind of thing, but in order to protect your mind, you need to stabilize your emotions and clear your mind. In that state, it's much easier to deflect a mental intrusion," Harry explained. He shrugged. "It's not like being able to keep people out of my mind is a bad thing either."

"Is that the plan right now?" Hermione asked, unusually persistent.  
"Or are you trying something else?"

Harry shrugged. "I really don't know. Daphne hasn't been keeping me in the dark, per se, but she hasn't told me that much either. But I also get the idea that there isn't much to tell. I think she's trying to find out how effective Occlumency might be." *I do wish she'd hurry up, though. After all, what's the worst that could happen?*

*You could shatter your mind into small pieces and not be able to put it back together again,* an irritated-sounding voice reminded him.

*Good point.*

*Some one needs to do the thinking in here...*

"**HARRY!**" The aforementioned thirteen-year old was jolted out of his mental conversation by Hermione yelling loudly at him. She looked terribly concerned. "Are you alright?" she asked, swallowing nervously, her eyes rapidly flicking over him, as if that would give her the answer to the question she'd just asked. "You kind of zoned out there...were you having a conversation with yourself?" Her voice raised noticeably in pitch, demonstrating her worry.

Seeing no other real option, Harry nodded. "Sorry," he said bashfully.  
"Can you repeat that?"

*"How can you just treat that like a normal occurrence?"* Hermione demanded. "That isn't a good thing, Harry, even in the wizarding world!" Angry tears glistened in her eyes. She was obviously beside herself that Harry didn't seem to show the slightest concern about his rather disturbing behavior.

"Because it is?" Harry offered. He put a hand on her shoulder.  
"Look...I'm sorry, Hermione," he said. She looked up at him, and he sighed, "but you've got to look at it from my perspective; I've been like this for months. Besides, all the voices sound the same. It's just me."

Hermione scoffed, and was about to retort, when she stopped, her eyes widened. "What do you mean, *months*? You've been awake for a week and a half!"

Harry winced. "Well, *technically*, that's correct...but I was vaguely aware of the outside world from about a week after Daphne ripped my mind up..." Harry noticed Hermione's eyes flicker with some indecipherable emotion that might have been shock. "...and I've been 'conscious' for about half that time, too. I'm a lot better at figuring out my own thoughts since then, I assure you. Half of what I was hearing was just babbling or so many random thoughts at once that they overlapped..."

"Do you remember everything?" Hermione asked abruptly. Harry jerked back in surprise.

"Yes..." he admitted nervously. "I remember pretty much everything...including what Daphne did to me," he added. Hermione went pale. "I also remember what happened to the two of you."

"How have you and Daphne been getting along?" Hermione asked, biting her lip.

Harry closed his eyes. "Well, I can't really give you a straight answer. She's been doing better since I told her that I still love her, which is true; she still means an amazing amount to me..."

"But..?"

"I just don't know," Harry said exasperatedly. He opened his eyes. "I just don't know. I *want* to forgive her, but I *can't*. What she did to me was horrible, and the fact that I've been forced to relieve it every night for several months doesn't help."

"You've been having nightmares?" Hermione asked. He nodded. "I suppose I should have expected that," she amended. "About Daphne?"

"And about what I did to everyone," he added. Hermione winced, and Harry chastised himself. He hadn't meant to make her feel guilty. "It's not your fault."

"I know that," Hermione snapped. She softened. "I'm just so sorry for you..."

"I'm okay," Harry said, trying and miserably failing to reassure her.  
"I'm not going to end up in the loony bin, for Merlin's sake."

"I know, but still..."

"You find the fact that I'm treating it as nothing unnerving," Harry finished for her. "I'm sorry about that, but I'm not going to change."

Just then, Daphne entered, looking rather cheerful. "Hello Hermione, it's nice to see you again." Hermione merely nodded, and Daphne looked hurt for an instant, but understanding. It was only natural that Harry's best friend was a bit cold to her. "Harry, I just realized you hadn't picked out your courses for next year."

"Electives?" Harry inquired. Daphne nodded. "What do you think I ought to take?"

"I don't know," his guardian admitted. "It really depends on what course path you see yourself pursuing. What are you taking, Hermione?"

"Everything," the bushy-haired bookworm replied unflinchingly.

Daphne's eyes widened comically. "*Everything?*" she asked in a disbelieving voice.

"Yes," Hermione replied. "I know you think that isn't possible, but I'm been assured that—"

"-Professor McGonagall will take care of it," Daphne finished for her. "Let me guess: she's getting something that will allow you to be in more than one place at once, so that you can attend classes whose timeslots overlap. Am I right?"

Hermione looked stunned. "Yes..." she replied in a small voice.

"How *is* that possible?" Harry asked. "It's not like you're using some kind of Time-Turner or something!"

Daphne sighed, closing her eyes. "Actually Harry, that's exactly what she is going to use."

"How do you know this?" Hermione demanded, recovering her composure. "Professor McGonagall said that I should tell no one."

Daphne looked Hermione in the eyes. She looked exasperated. "Let me tell you the story of the smart little Muggleborn girl, her pureblood best friend, and the Time-Turner that the little Muggleborn girl actually thought she could hide from her best friend. Just like you, this little girl thought that she should take every single opportunity to learn everything she could. Her secret lasted about a week. The pureblood best friend foolishly allowed the little Muggleborn to continue. When the little Muggleborn missed two classes in a row and looked like the walking dead, the very irritated pureblood threw her friend's Time-Turner off the Astronomy Tower. The Ministry was not happy, and billed the pureblood girl's parents 400 galleons. The little pureblood girl was grounded for the next summer," Daphne said. Her voice didn't break, but there was a slight hesitation as she mentioned the parents. Harry supposed that any mention of Daphne's parents brought back painful memories.

"I don't understand...you don't mean..."

"The little Muggleborn girl was also known as Lily Evans. Her grounded best friend was Daphne O'Connor. Daphne did not speak to Lily for two weeks after they returned to Hogwarts the next year. Lily was very sorry that she had been such an idiot."

Harry burst out laughing, and Daphne was smiling brightly. Hermione looked rather embarrassed. "Are you trying to tell me something?" she asked, her face bright red.

"Time-Turners should never be placed in the hands of overly ambitious children, for *their own* sanity," Daphne explained. "Drop Muggle Studies: it's a waste of time and suitable only for the most pampered purebloods, who don't take it anyway. Drop Divination, it's a waste of time. Actually, I'm not sure why they teach it; true Seers are born, not taught."

"That leaves Arithmacy, Ancient Runes, and Care of Magical Creatures," Hermione said.

Daphne nodded. "All worthwhile, quality courses. Harry, if you really want my opinion, I'd choose Ancient Runes and Care of Magical Creatures. I know the reputation of the Professor teaching the former. She's an expert in her field, and has expanded the curriculum to expand basic introductory studies of Goblin runes and a few other types. I know that you are interested in that. Care of Magical Creatures is interesting and informative. You'll like it."

A part of Harry wanted to refuse just to spite the woman that had hurt him, but the (currently) dominant Harry told that part of him to sod off and nodded. "Sign me up. Hermione?"

"Alright, I'll go to Professor McGonagall and cancel those other courses." She sighed, but smiled faintly. "You did probably save me a lot of pain."

"I *definitely* saved you a lot of pain," Daphne amended. "And I came up here to get you. Your parents are badgering the house-elf you came with to come take you home."

"*Already?*" Hermione whined. "Alright." She pulled Harry into a warm embrace, but not bone-crushing like the previous one. "It was good to see you again. I'll write Ginny, if you don't mind. She's going spare in Egypt, worrying about you."

Harry winced. "I'll write her too."

Hermione nodded, and then got off the bed. "Bye." She left with Daphne, Harry staring after her. He shook his head to clear it, then lay back on the bed and closed his eyes.

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"Alright Harry, hit me with everything you've got!" Tonks taunted, bouncing back and forth on her heels. She stood across from Harry, clad in her red Auror battle robes. The Metamorphmagus, who sported short, spiky pink hair and disorienting light green eyes, was wearing a determined look on her face.

"He will do *nothing* of the sort," Daphne reminded her, standing off to the side. Her eyes bored into Harry's as an extra reminder. Harry

flinched, and she averted her gaze. Harry refocused on the scene in front of him.

"I'm just a little rusty," Harry assured her. "I'm overcharging my spells."

"Maybe," Daphne replied, with a little nervousness. *Will you leave it alone, woman?*

"Alright, let's go. *Stupefy!*" Tonks shouted. They'd both agreed to stick to simple Light spells to avoid injury.

Harry dodged the Stunner with ease, and then dropped to the ground to avoid the Babbling Curse she threw at him next. Harry gave her a strange look, and she returned it with a Bat-Bogey Hex. *Shouldn't have let Ginny teach her that one.*

Harry dodged it too, and then raised his own wand. "*Percutio!*"

He said the word almost lazily, relaxing his body and magic, placing no emphasis whatsoever on the incantation or the spell itself. So when his wand buckled, he felt intense pain in his chest, and a massive blast of purple light about two feet in diameter shot forth from his wand, he was absolutely stunned.

Tonks' eyes widened as the supercharged spell came at her. She didn't even get a chance to throw up a shield before she was hurled backward into the far wall, slamming into it with a sickening crack

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A/N: Somehow, I already managed to stick in my first cliffie. Tonks isn't dead; it would be rather stupid to kill off one of my favorite characters *three chapters into the third book*. But the fact that Harry just sent her crashing into a wall is rather important. It'll be explained in much more detail next chapter. I didn't just write the whole Chamber scene the way I did because I enjoy making the characters suffer.

Speaking of which, here's my take on Slightly Unbalanced!Harry. He hears voices in his head (his own thoughts), he's rather confused emotionally, and he's also a bit more mature than last we saw him.

Another reason that I made Harry's second year into such a living hell. I know what I want Harry to be by book seven. To get there, a lot of things need to happen so that Voldemort doesn't splatter him like a pancake and give his remains to Bellatrix for lunch.

If you haven't guessed yet, my favorite character in canon is Hermione. Somebody mentioned in a review of the previous book that she was too perfect. I'm not completely sure where that came from. I hope Daphne's little deflation of her insane dreams of academic bliss helps. Point is, I'm not going to do what I've seen far too many people writing H/G romances do and either villify her or make her a secondary character.

On that note, I want to remind people that canon Harry Potter is NOT a romance novel, and this series is going to be the furthest thing from it. I care far more about the Death Eaters ravaging Britain than Harry and Ginny's hogsmeade date. I want to make that very clear. Their relationship will develop at a slow pace, reflecting the fact that Harry's going to be very busy. On the subject of Ginny's character, she really hasn't changed that much yet. She's stubborn, like all the Weasleys, and so she won't become what I want her to be overnight. If you haven't noticed, and you'd have to be a concussed troll not to, I'm making this as realistic as I can (in my opinion).

To me, Daphne represents a crutch that Harry has been leaning on his entire life. This is step one of his becoming more independent. Their relationship is never going to be what it was. That said, they still love each other, and would still die for each other. Especially Daphne.

Harry will begin to gain more friends and allies in this book, but more of the latter, and only one person is going to get as close to Harry as Hermione and Ginny are. But they will come from all houses, backgrounds, Light and Dark, species, etc. Harry is not going to win the war by fighting only with Slytherins. That's a nice, quick way to get yourself killed.

Yes, Harry has a bit more perspective on his father than he did in canon. As for what he thinks of him, it's difficult because he never knew him. It's sad, but Daphne is "in all but blood," Harry's mother.

As for Snape, as you see, Harry will be seeing quite a bit of him. One thing I promise you is that Snape will never become all "Molly Weasley." That's so OOC its not even funny. In many ways, Snape is as frightened of getting close to people as Remus is. But Snape has a darker past, was abused by his father, ridiculed at school, and driven by bitterness and hatred.

I can never fully redeem Ron, but I can make him a civilized human being. That might take a while, and Harry is never going to be friends with him. It still remains possible that he'll grow to trust him, or at least, his allegiance to the Light.

Finally, about some similarities between this work and the Sacrifices Arc. It *is* what really inspired me to create this AU. There will be things that I liked so much that I've included in here. I'll do my best to change them, but some concepts, such as magical heirs, are impossible to completely change. That said, certain things, such as the webs and *vates* will never be a part of this. That would be downright plagiarism on my part. But if personalities seem similar, or other concepts appear, just take it as my testament to her brilliance. She's *that* good.

On the subject of reviews, it's fascinating how many I got when I asked about them. To be honest, I was more looking for the *reasons* that I was getting so few, rather than begging for reviews themselves. But trust me, those reviews are used for more than just my ego gratification and encouragement. I've changed countless things because what you said made me realize that what I had planned simply did not make sense. The entire premise to this story was *proposed* by a reader. I really do appreciate it when you take the time to write them.

As for the title of this chapter, it's referring to two things. First, literally, the confusion that Harry is experiencing. Second, the fact that multiple people have multiple ideas about how to treat his condition.

## Chapter 4: Burden of a Destiny

Tonks slid down the wall that she had just crashed into, slumping at the base, unconscious. Harry stood looking on in horror, his wand still extended, his body frozen. A tingling feeling remained in what he suspected was his magical core, in about the center of his chest.

Daphne gasped and ran over to the young woman, turning her over. Harry watched in sickened fascination as blood slowly ran down the wall, pooling near where his 'big sister' lay, a bloody head wound showing through her pink hair. Daphne turned to him, and began shouting something, but he was not listening. *I just killed Tonks. I just killed her...*

"*HARRY!*" Daphne screamed at him. He jolted back into awareness. "She's alive, but I think her skull might be fractured. I'm taking her to St. Mungo's. Stay here, and don't perform any magic," she instructed him. Daphne performed a quick healing charm on the bloody lump at the back of Tonks' head, but Harry feared his guardian was right about the injury.

Harry nodded dumbly. Daphne gave him an anxious, pitying look. "It's not your fault, Harry. It really isn't. I don't know what happened, but we'll find out. Don't blame yourself, she'll be *fine*."

Daphne left, levitating Tonks' unconscious form in front of her. Harry was left alone with his thoughts. Feelings of guilt, shock, anger (at himself,) shame, fear and disbelief cycled through his mind. Some were whispered softly, other screamed at top volume. Cradling his head in his hands, he sat down on one of the armchairs and practically *willed* himself to sleep.

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"...Harry...Harry..." a soft voice whispered. "...Harry, wake up..."

"...Harry..."

The aforesaid Boy-Who-Lived cracked open an eye, and was met by the hazy sight of his guardian leaning over him. She was looking at him, a bit concerned. Suddenly, Harry remembered what had

happened to Tonks. He was awake in an instant. "Daphne!" he breathed. "What about Tonks?"

Daphne smiled slightly. "She's fine, Harry. Cracked skull, unfortunately, but no brain damage..." she paused, smirking, "...not that you'd be able to tell," she said jokingly. Harry snorted despite himself.

"Andromeda probably dropped her on her head when she was younger," Harry replied. His mood turned somber. "Can I visit her at some point...just to see how she's doing?"

"The Healers say she might be out for a day or so, but I'm sure that that will be fine," Daphne replied. She began pacing, and Harry watched her patiently. *What does she want now?* An angry voice demanded. *Is ripping her adopted son's mind up not enough for the Grey Maiden? Bloody sadistic wench...*

Harry was a bit shocked by those thoughts and frantically tried to bury them. He should have gotten used to it by now, but the thoughts were so alien, so out of character. What made it more disturbing was that he knew that they were *his own*. He really did resent Daphne a great deal, and took his time to criticize her every mistake or action that irritated him in some way.

"...Great," Harry replied finally. "I mean...yeah, that's great..."

Daphne closed her eyes. "We need to find out what happened."

Harry nodded, but said, "I honestly think I'm just rusty."

Daphne shook her head. "That's not it at all, Harry." She paced around the room again. "What I felt was one of the most powerful bursts of magic I've ever encountered. It was up there along with Voldemort, with Dumbledore."

Harry's eyes widened.

"Harry, I don't understand how, but your magic has increased at least threefold, possibly more. You've always been very skilled for your age, but in terms of raw power, you were just above-average, nothing

exceptional or unusual," she explained. She ran a hand through her hair. "What I just felt was incredible. O'Connor's can sense powerful magic, as you know. They tend to sense it in the form of a song or melody, and sometimes a scent. I've only been in Voldemort's presence twice," she said, scowling in disgust. "His magic is immense, extraordinarily powerful, but it's filthy, *dirty, dark*. It's full of blackness and disease...really; it smells to me like *burning flesh*."

Daphne's face darkened considerably. "There is no fouler odor on this earth than the stench of burning human flesh," she said coldly. Harry realized that she'd probably first encounter it when he McCourns had tortured her parents and burned her father alive. *I suppose that would be enough to classify it as the worst smell in existence.*

"Dumbledore's magic, as you might imagine, is far more pleasant," she continued. Harry listened intently. Daphne's ability was not all that rare among purebloods, and it was possible that Harry might possess it as well. However, the extent to which Daphne's family could detect and measure magic was unique. "It's like beautiful music. It's uplifting, it's *Light*. It's everything that Voldemort's magic is not. It actually sounds a great deal like phoenix song."

Daphne stopped pacing and stared hard into his eyes. "I feel the same from you...not the stench of Voldemort or the beauty of Dumbledore, but the same power, the same deep attraction to your magic." Daphne paused, swallowing hard. "There is Darkness in your magic, quite a bit of it, actually...which makes me think I know where it came from..."

"Riddle..." Harry breathed. He looked up at her. "When Dumbledore destroyed him, his magic remained. It sought out the closest grounding point, like lightning in a thunderstorm." He took a deep breath. "The mind link, the one he established in my consciousness."

Daphne nodded gravely. She closed her eyes. "Harry," she said, her eyes clouded with emotion, "you should be either dead or incapable of speech or thought. You *shouldn't* have healed at all, much less heal as fast as you did. That magic saved you, rebuilt your mind."

"The ultimate irony," Harry remarked. "So what do we do now?"

Daphne seemed to make a decision about something. "I spoke to Dumbledore about this. He agrees with me...that your power needs to be controlled."

Harry got to his feet angrily, eyes burning with fury. "*WHAT?*"

For a moment, Daphne looked absolutely terrified. Then Harry relaxed a bit, and her face became an emotional mask. "Harry, listen to me. This is for-"

"This is for my safety, isn't it?" Harry snarled sarcastically. "You want to *control me*, to use me as your bloody *weapon!*"

Daphne was completely pale, and staring at him in shock. "*What are you talking about?*"

"*You know what I'm talking about...*" he hissed back. He didn't know it, but his green eyes had darkened so much that they were nearly black. His anger, his rage had taken over. He had been controlled by Riddle. He would *never* allow it to happen again.

Daphne drew her wand. "Harry, sit down," she ordered, using a tone she rarely used with him. It was a testament to her desperation. "We haven't done anything, and won't unless *you* approve it."

"Why?" he demanded, remaining standing.

"I'm not going to lie, Harry," Daphne said, her eyes hard and cold. "You are dangerous. To you, to others, to *me*," she said, stressing the word. It was manipulative of her, but Harry's unstable mind was close to being pushed over the edge. With the power he had at his disposal, Daphne didn't know if he'd be able to stop him. She was already shocked by the rage and hatred that he possessed, a great deal of which was directed at her. *You've got to do this, Daphne. You've got to make him understand...*

"How?" he cried angrily. "How is *my* power a danger to *me*?" Under normal circumstances, Daphne would have found the fact that he was thinking of his well being first both intriguing and disturbing. She didn't allow any of her emotions to show. If she displayed any sign of

weakness, it might be her last mistake. Dumbledore's warning echoed in her mind, the warning she had so completely ignored.

*Be careful, Daphne. Do not betray his trust. You must make him understand and accept the truth or the consequences will be dire. At the very least, you will perish. I've never encountered a boy of such power. His mental state merely makes the situation even more hazardous.*

"Your body is not used to using such great amounts of magic," she explained, miraculously keeping her composure. "You *will* die if we do not bind it, and then reintroduce it, gradually. Eventually, you will be able to harness it safely."

Harry seemed to consider this, and his black eyes became a few shades lighter. "How do I know that you are telling me the truth?" he demanded. "How do I know that this isn't a ploy? You *hurt* me, Daphne. I have no reason to trust you."

The impact of his words was like a dagger through her heart, but she persevered. "I swear in the name of Merlin that we will not bind you against your will," she said. "I will die if I break that oath."

His eyes were now a jade green. "Very well," he said. The malice and hatred was fading from his voice, slowly. "What do you want to do?"

"First, I want you to sit down and relax. You aren't well, Harry," Daphne told him firmly, with a hint of pity. Too much pity and Harry might get violent again. *Albus was right. This has come at the worst possible time. He's far too unstable.*

Harry looked like he was going to retort, than sat down. Daphne slid her wand back into her holster, and sat down across from him. "I want to put a block on your magic. A block that only I can release...that's just to prevent you from getting so angry or upset that you do it yourself," she quickly added. "I also want to teach you Occlumency."

Harry nodded. His face was a mask of regret and sorrow. "I'm sorry..." he murmured quietly. "I don't know what came over me...I just lost control." He looked up at her, and Daphne could see the fear

in his eyes. "I don't understand what's wrong with me..." He sat back in the chair, eyes wide.

Daphne got up and walked over to him. "Will you agree to it? I can do it right now. I can't promise that it will solve all of your problems, but it will help."

Harry nodded. "Can you at least leave a little extra power out?" he looked up at her. "It can't hurt, can it?"

Daphne shrugged. "It shouldn't. Hang on; I might have to knock you out to make this work."

Harry blanched a bit, but recovered his composure and nodded. "Go ahead."

"*Stupefy*," Daphne whispered. A small jet of red light hit Harry in the chest and he slumped into his chair. Daphne called upon her magic, extending towards her ward. She slipped through the large holes in Harry's mental defenses, began feeling for his magical core. She found it, and began to erect the barriers.

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"Harry, do you really think it would be *that* easy to get rid of me?" Tonks asked him, feigning a hurt expression. "I thought you knew me better than that," she moped.

Harry felt as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He sat down on the bed next to his big sister. "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, just like a few trolls were hitting Bludgers around in my head," Tonks remarked off-handedly. "How are you doing on this fine day?"

They were in one of the short-term wards at St. Mungo's. Daphne had gone over to inform Andromeda, and assure her that she didn't need to worry. Harry didn't think it would be that difficult. Andromeda certainly cared for Nymphadora a great deal, but she didn't seem overly concerned when her daughter hurt herself; at least, she didn't drop everything she was doing to come to her daughter's aid. Harry supposed that she might have gotten used to it. Tonks could be *exceedingly* clumsy at times. She'd mastered the art of tripping over

nothing but her own feet, and normally destroying something expensive in the process. A number of broken vases and picture frames that Daphne had needed to repair stood testament to that.

*And despite all of that, she's as graceful as a swan when she's dueling. She's quick on her feet, agile, and nimble. Go figure...*

*It can't come from her mother; she's a regal Black pureblood who is in full control of her body at all times. Must come from her father. Personally, I prefer the unruly black hair to the 'gift' of being a royal klutz.*

*Can't exactly argue with that...*

"Oi...Hey Harry, you still awake in there?" Tonks asked, breaking through his thoughts. She rapped his knuckles on his head. Harry cursed under his breath and tried to get away.

"Ow!" he cried, massaging his sore head. It seemed like Tonks had been at it for a while. *These little mental conversations are really getting annoying.* "Damn you, woman!"

"Oh, stop whining," Tonks replied. "Your head doesn't hurt as much as mine." Harry's face fell, and the young woman realized that probably wasn't the best thing to say. "Oh hell, sorry, Harry. Don't worry about me, I'm feeling good enough to perform my big sisterly duties."

"And would that involve abusing me verbally and physically at every opportunity?" Harry asked.

Tonks nodded emphatically. "You're too serious sometimes Harry. You need to relax once in a while."

"Good thing I have you then," Harry remarked.

"I don't know what you'd do without me," Tonks replied, stretching and yawning. "Bloody hell, I'm exhausted. Must be the Healing Potions, things taste like troll dung and put you out like a candle." She sat up and yanked, more than pulled, Harry into a fierce embrace. "Stay out of trouble, will ya?"

"Anything for you, Tonks," Harry replied cheekily. She slapped his arm. "OW!"

"Quit whining you wuss," Tonks said sleepily. "Visit me, will ya? I know I'll be out of here in a day or two, but still..." she yawned, lying back on the bed. "See ya tomorrow *Ickle Harrikins*," she said softly.

Harry glared at her. "*Bloody wench*," he muttered darkly. But Tonks was gone, off to whatever served as her dreamland. Harry imagined that things didn't make much sense and were both confusing and amusing to the outsider. *God she's a strange one, but I love her all the same.*

Harry patted her arm, and then left the ward, searching for a fireplace to floo home. Daphne had said she'd have the house-elves make something special for dinner. Harry *loved* marinated lamb. He could only hope.

He turned a corner, and bumped into a very downcast looking Neville Longbottom. The boy looked confused, then slightly frightened by the sight of him. *Well, he is friends with Weasley*, Harry reminded himself. Still, the boy had never really seemed to buy into the garbage that spewed from Ronald Weasley's mouth on a regular basis.

*Harry, when did you start judging people this quickly?* a voice that sounded strangely like Hermione asked him.

"Hello Neville," Harry said in greeting.

The slight-pudgy, downcast-looking Gryffindor jumped in surprise, eyes scanning frantically for whoever had recognized him. His brown eyes, wide with what Harry thought was either fear or anxiousness, finally came to rest on where Harry stood. He was surprised by Neville's reaction; the boy with a notoriously bad memory would be unlikely to remember his voice...then he recalled what Neville had said first year about not wanting people to know what had happened to his parents. *He must be visiting them.*

"Hullo Harry," the brown-haired boy replied nervously. He looked him up and down, as if searching for a hospital gown that would indicate that he was a patient. "What are you doing here?" The question was

asked in such a hesitant tone of voice that it made Harry think that Neville was afraid of offending him. Of course, a voice reminded him, *he's always skittish and nervous. Maybe he's so lacking in self-confidence that he's scared of getting into any kind of fight.* Harry had to pity the boy after that thought, realizing that he was probably right.

"I'm visiting a friend," Harry explained vaguely. He had no intentions of sharing the reasons that his friend was here, or who his friend was.

"Oh..." Neville replied. "How are you feeling?" he asked, once again using the quiet and nervous tone. *He must be scared; it's not like the entire wizarding world doesn't know that I was in a coma.*

"Much better, thank you," Harry said. "Are you visiting your parents?"

As he had expected, the question made Neville jump almost a foot in the air, and he paled considerably. Then he seemed to remember that Harry had known about them since before he came to Hogwarts. The boy simply nodded quickly. "Yeah..." he said, obviously depressed. "Gran's talking to one of their Healers right now," he explained.

Harry nodded, remembering that Neville lived with the rather well known Augusta Longbottom, the fierce and proud matriarch of an old Light family. The woman had been in politics in her younger days, and had been one of the first women to hold a major post in the Ministry of Magic. Harry could not remember at the moment which position she had held. Her career had been very brief, as well as groundbreaking.

He smiled at him, something that made Neville cringe, and Harry frown. "How has your summer been?" Harry asked, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice. He really did not like it when people that he did *not* want to fear him did. That wasn't to say that he was not pleased when Ronald Weasley paled at the sight of him. *I'd rather that he runs away in terror, but he's too bloody thick to do that.*

"...Oh, well, it's been okay. I visited Seamus up in Ireland, and, um...saw Ron," he said quickly, obviously remembering the animosity between the black-haired Slytherin and the redheaded Gryffindor. "Oh, and Gran's been tutoring me in Potions...well...um, I'm really

good at Herbology, remember?" Harry nodded, the boy was of considerable skill in that field, and perhaps the only class that Harry could say that about. "...well, she thought my confidence was shot, and she says since Mum was good at Potions, that I couldn't be completely useless."

Harry frowned. Sometimes he wondered if Augusta knew just how damaging comparing Neville's exploits and abilities to his parents' could be. Neville was a different person. He'd come to Hogwarts expecting to fail, and indeed, Neville joked that his family thought he might be a Squib until his Great-Uncle had accidentally dropped him out a window. *Accidental magic manifests itself from fear, anger, or frustration*, Harry remembered. *Neville's as gentle-hearted as they come, so I suppose they really did have to 'scare the magic out of him.'*

"You just need to focus, Neville, and ignore the presence of Snape," Harry reassured him. "Your knowledge of Herbology is excellent, and quite a few potions are made from plants. Also, because you understand the properties of them, you'll be able to fix mistakes by knowing which ingredients neutralize others. You just need to believe in yourself...and find another partner. Weasley's so focused on his hatred of Snape that he doesn't put any effort into brewing."

Neville had turned bright red, though he frowned a bit when Harry criticized Ron. Then he shrugged. "I suppose you're right. Snape just scares me."

Harry disguised a snort with a cough, which made Neville look at him strangely. "The man rules by fear. It's pointless to do what Weasley does, which is stand up to him; so don't feel that you should. He has the power, and he's always in a foul mood, so he's not afraid to punish you. Either ignore his presence or try to prove him wrong...not by words, mind, but by the quality of your potion."

Neville was staring at him intently, and Harry imagined that he was reassessing his original opinion of Harry's character. *Good for him; unlike Weasley, he's capable of seeing sense.* "Thanks, Harry...really, thanks." The words were spoken softly and anxiously, but Harry could

hear the true gratitude and earnestness behind them. Satisfying warmth filled him at helping the boy.

“Neville, dear?” an old woman’s voice inquired. Harry turned to see a tall woman with an aristocratic bearing and wearing fine robes of green. She carried a weathered red handbag. Her gray hair was pulled back into a neat bun. Her face was weathered and wrinkled, and in her blue eyes Harry saw the years of experience that she possessed. She wore a pair of ruby earrings and an antique gold bracelet decorated with the same stones. *A Gryffindor if I’ve ever seen one*, Harry remarked to himself.

Perhaps the strangest thing she wore was an red hat that had a top it a stuffed vulture. *And if there was an animal that better suited this woman, I don’t know what it is.*

The woman gazed at him with calculating eyes, flicking only briefly the scar on his forehead. “You do look just like James, Mr. Potter,” she remarked. “Except for your eyes, of course; Lily’s.” She paused, and Harry began to feel slightly nervous as she examined him like a piece of rare art. He could understand why Neville was almost frightened of her. Her gaze was piercing and intense. “Though, if I am correct, you have lost your innocence long before they did.”

Harry didn’t react visibly, but he was internally awed by the woman. *No wonder she was so feared. If she can make me wither with a look, and she’s just being observant, I can’t imagine what it must have been like to face her down on the floor of the Wizengamot. I wonder why she left politics...*

“You would be correct, Ma’am,” Harry replied politely. “I’ve seen a number of things that children my age should not.”

The Longbottom matriarch nodded slowly. Harry remained still. She smiled sadly. “I saw your parents often, Harry,” she said, using Harry’s name for the first time, something which indicated both trust and familiarity. “Alice was among Lily’s best friends, and Frank spoke often of your father. He was a year behind them, of course.”

Harry didn’t actually know that, but nodded anyway. “I’ve heard Daphne talk about Alice before,” he admitted. Neville stiffened,

looking at him strangely. *You never asked*, he answered the younger Gryffindor silently.

Augusta frowned slightly. "Where is your guardian, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "I was planning to Floo home right now. I was just visiting a friend." The true reason was that Daphne was talking to Dumbledore about how to proceed with Harry's power, mental health, and other issues. Daphne assured him that she'd give him all the basics, but that he probably would prefer to hear it in a setting where they weren't referring to him as if he wasn't there. Harry wanted to visit Tonks, anyway.

"Ah, I see," Augusta replied. She straightened, resuming her regal, upright posture and imperious gaze. "Well, we must be going as well. It was nice to meet you, Mr. Potter. Come on, Neville, the Yukas Trees need watering." Neville submissively followed her, waving weakly to Harry on the way out.

Harry headed for the lobby, hiding his scar to avoid a hassle. Some people still recognized him, but he ignored the whispers and stares. He paid for a pinch of Floo powder, and threw it into one of the fireplaces. A "Dressler Manor" later and he was hurtling through countless fireplaces.

Harry had never been very graceful during Floo travel. He'd gotten better ever since crashing into two solid objects in one day two years ago, but he still was uneasy and tended to have, well...*rough* landings.

He reached the grate, and, unsurprisingly, was hurled out of the fireplace at an unsafe velocity and completely unbalanced. What was surprising was that he hit something, or rather, that he hit *someone*. *That* someone collapsed to the ground with a yell of surprise. When he opened his eyes, he looked down upon a pair of surprised-looking brown eyes, belonging to a small face surrounded by a halo of red hair. She was groaning. "*Harry?*" her muffled voice asked. "*Owwwww...can you please move?*"

"Um...Hi Ginny," Harry said, propping himself up on his elbows, trying to pick himself up off the ground.

“GINERVA MOLLY WEASLEY!” a loud, shrill, ear-splitting voice screeched. Harry also heard laughter. He turned his head as best he could and saw a red-faced, short, plump red-haired woman who looked absolutely livid. In the door leading to the living room, Daphne was pounding her fists against the wall, shaking with mirth. *Oh, I'm sure you think this is funny...*

“Um...Harry,” Ginny squeaked from beneath him, her face red as a tomato. “Moving? Remember?”

Harry managed to extricate himself from his best friend, and from the burning on his cheeks, knew that he was about as embarrassed as she was. He stuck out a hand and helped her to her feet. Daphne was still shaking, but no sound was coming out. Mrs. Weasley still looked furious.

“It’s my fault, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry explained. “I’m rather, well...awful at Floo travel, and Ginny was standing in the way...”

Ginny was still red-faced and was desperately trying to hide it. Harry was on his own. “Well, I’m sorry about...what that looked like,” Harry said lamely. Ginny squeaked. Her mother’s expression softened, then she smiled.

“I shouldn’t have made that assumption, Harry,” she said. She chuckled. “You have to imagine what I saw...” Harry felt his cheeks warm, though he wasn’t as revolted by the thought as he’d thought he’d be...

“MUM!” Ginny cried, blushing, (if it was possible,) even worse.

“Oh hush, Ginny, I wasn’t saying anything of the sort,” Molly said. Daphne still did not appear to have recovered the art of coherent speech. She too was red-faced, but for a different reason. Harry found himself resenting her for that, and for once, didn’t find it strange in the least. *She might help me, but no, she’d rather laugh her arse off.*

*It probably did look pretty funny, you know.*

*Shut up.*

"Harry?" Ginny asked, waving a hand in front of his face. Daphne's grin disappeared in an instant.

Harry blinked. "Yes?"

"Happy Birthday!" she cried, throwing her arms around his waist. Harry returned the warm, friendly embrace. After all they'd been through, neither one of them were embarrassed by the display. That didn't mean that Mrs. Weasley wasn't surprised, or even slightly alarmed.

Neither one of them wanted to let go, but they did anyway. Harry smiled encouragingly at her, and she smiled back shyly. "I missed you," she whispered.

"Me too," he replied. "I missed you and Hermione badly. How was the rest of your Egypt trip, anyway?"

"Oh, I wrote about it in my last letter...you didn't get it?" Ginny asked, confused.

"That's my fault," Daphne explained. "You mentioned your visit, and I felt it would be a nice surprise. It only came this morning, so you two can catch up." She turned to Ginny's mother. "Would you like to stay for dinner?" Harry could see from the look in her eyes that Daphne was absolutely determined to let Harry and Ginny have some time together.

Molly sighed. "Well, I suppose we could. Arthur took Charlie and Ronald to see one of those...what do the Muggles call them...*carnivals*?" Daphne nodded. "Yes, well, I forbid Fred and George to go, *of course*. And Percy is at home, but he'll be busy...so I suppose I could stay..."

Ginny beamed. "Come on, Harry, I want to tell you about the Pyramids!" she grabbed Harry's wrist and hauled him into the next room. Harry wasn't completely sure that her childlike enthusiasm was entirely genuine.

Regardless, when they were in the next room, one of several sitting rooms, Ginny shut the door behind them, and her smile vanished.

Harry realized that he'd indeed been correct in believing that she was appearing less mature than she was for the benefit of her mother. *How could they ever doubt that she was a Slytherin?*

*They're idiots? At least Ron is.*

*Oh, right.*

"You're talking to yourself, aren't you?" Ginny asked, sitting down on the couch. She patted the cushion next to her, and Harry sat down. "Hermione told me about that."

Harry, his head in his hands, nodded through them. He looked over at her. "Yeah, it happens sometimes. They can be quite...interesting," he admitted. "They're my thoughts, for whatever that's worth. I'm not hearing voices from other people."

"That's why Hermione said that you were sane, rather than back to normal," Ginny said, obviously as concerned as Harry's other best friend. "I really don't think you are taking this seriously enough. We really worry about you, Harry. You mean a lot to both of us."

"I know that," Harry groaned. "But if I allow myself to be as concerned as you two are, I'll drive myself nuts. It's hard to *prevent* yourself from thinking..."

Ginny sighed. "I don't know, Harry...has anything else happened with this Occlumency thing? The way Hermione described it, I don't understand how it will help."

"It might, it might not," Harry admitted. "If I'm good at it, it will give me practice at both clearing my mind of emotions and random thoughts. Of course, the way my mind is now, it might be impossible to do either of those things. But honestly Ginny, would you and Hermione prefer that I was bonkers?"

Ginny froze, then grabbed Harry's arm so tightly that it cut off blood circulation. Harry was almost frightened by the look in her eyes. "*Don't say that...For the Love of Merlin, don't say that,*" she said between clenched teeth.

Harry stared at her. "I was just joking..."

Ginny spluttered. "*Joking? JOKING? DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW SCARED WE WERE THAT WE'D NEVER TALK TO YOU AGAIN, THAT YOU MIGHT BE DEAD OR A VEGETABLE IN THE PERMANENT WARD AT ST. MUNGO'S? DO YOU HAVE ANY FUCKING IDEA?*"

Harry just stared in shock at her. She took a deep breath. "I have six brothers," she reminded him, as if trying to explain her choice of language. "I picked up a few things." She sniffled loudly, and Harry saw the angry tears in her eyes. "*Damn it, Harry...can't you try to understand...?*"

Harry felt ashamed and angry for not understanding why Hermione and Ginny were so resentful of his behavior. "You *really* do sound like your mother," he said instead. Ginny nodded, but seemed to be expecting something else. "...and I'm sorry," Harry said after a brief pause.

"Don't be," Ginny said softly. "I think we need to think about how you feel about this."

"Can we just admit all three of us were being somewhat inconsiderate, and leave it at that?" Harry asked.

"Only if you agree to take this more seriously," she said firmly. "Just try, *please*?"

Harry raised his hands helplessly. "I'm not sure how to do that," he admitted. "I can't do *anything*!"

Ginny, tears in her eyes, pulled him into another fierce hug, crying into his shoulder. Harry patted his friend on the back. "*It's just...not f-f-fair,*" she cried, "*y-y-you're j-j-just a k-k-kid...y-y-you s-s-shouldn't have to g-g-go through this.*"

Harry gently pried her arms off of him so that he could look her in the eyes. "No, it isn't," he said. "But life isn't...fair, I mean," he clarified.

Ginny closed her eyes, and chuckled weakly. "You must think I'm just a stupid little girl..." her eyes were downcast, and Harry could tell that she meant it. "I'm not Hermione, I'll never be," she said miserably.

"Ginny?" She looked up at him. "Shut up."

"I suppose this is where you tell me that I'm completely wrong," she said, sighing. "I'm sorry Harry, I just...I feel like a tag-a-long sometimes." She turned away from him for a moment. "I've always been like that. I'm only friends with you and Hermione because you were nice enough to help out the crying girl..." She laughed, though it came out as more of a sniffle. "And it's not like you had much of a choice in the matter...I basically *threw* myself at you."

Harry couldn't exactly argue with that. Still, he needed to help her. "It doesn't matter, Ginny. You're a special person, a very good witch..."

"Only because I've got you and Hermione," she said miserably. "You've got to understand...Mum was ecstatic when she saw my marks...Professor McGonagall commented on how hard I worked, and even Professor Snape mentioned me...well, as a positive comparison to how badly behaved the Twins were in his class, but you helped me with that too..."

"Would you rather that we didn't help you as much? That you be allowed to learn more on your own?" Harry asked.

Ginny shook her head. "No...yes...I don't know. I enjoy the tutoring, and I learn things that I don't learn in class, but still...I just don't know if I could still do it on my own...I'm not that smart..."

Harry grabbed her by the shoulder, and she looked up at him in surprise. "Yes, you are, Ginny. Trust me, you managed a few things in training last year that amazed me. Your Striking Curse is just vicious."

Ginny giggled. "I still remember the look on Ron's face..."

Harry grinned. "He really thought you were going to hit him...down there."

"Too bad Hermione had to stop me," Ginny said. Then her smile vanished again. "I just...I don't..."

"Ginny, trust me, you are a *very* fast learner," Harry reassured her. "If you want us to, we'll let you try to do more of it on your own. We'll be there to help you if you need it. But don't put yourself down like that."

"How can you be this mature?" Ginny asked in a serious tone. "You sound like an adult, or like my Mum."

Harry shrugged. "I can't say I always practice what I preach. I know a lot of things, and I've had to grow up very fast...am I at least helping any?"

Ginny nodded. "Thanks..."

Harry patted her on the shoulder. "C'mon, why don't you clean up, and we'll get back to Daphne and your Mum before they think the worst." He said the last with a sly grin. Ginny turned bright red. *Works every time...it really isn't that nice, though...*

"**HARRY!**"

---

Harry put down the book he'd been reading for the last hour or so, then decided that he needed to speak to Daphne about what exactly they would do about his magic. Daphne had bound it, and explained that she had used a combination of Legilimency and the O'Connor aura detection gift to erect mental wards to seal off access to much of his new power, at least until he was skilled enough to control it.

He had to admit that once Daphne had managed to calm him down, he understood why she and Dumbledore felt that it was so necessary. He was *frightened* by the thought that he'd nearly killed the young woman he thought of as an older sister by using a simple curse. It scared him to imagine what could have happened if he'd been emotionally unsettled, or worse, in a deep rage. What if he'd used something more dangerous, like a Slicing Curse?

*Fairly simple really, Harry. You'd be burying a good friend.*

And for that reason, Harry had agreed to the procedure. He didn't want to hurt other people, but it was also related to the fact that if he used that much magic anytime soon, it could kill him. Daphne had been alarmed, to say the least, when he said that he'd felt an intense burning in his chest. Daphne had explained that while the magical core of a wizard or witch linked with the mind, the actual nexus of magical energy was located in the area that had been in severe pain. Strangely, there were no physiological differences between Muggles and wizards; the magical core simply existed, and could be sensed by very few without the aid of spells.

He still spent hours at a time trying to understand why he'd reacted so...*violently* to the possibility of his power being controlled. He'd originally believed that it was related to the feeling of helplessness and fear resulting from losing control of his mind to Tom Riddle, but Harry wondered if there might be more than that.

*I wanted to kill her. I wanted to maim her, to punish her not only for hurting me, but for, well...enslaving me, I suppose is the way that I perceived it.*

*You cannot be controlled again. Riddle used you. He gained your trust, became your friend. He gave you the companionship you needed.*

*Hermione and Ginny are excellent friends.*

*Be that as it may, you need someone of your own gender. You may understand girls better than most boys your age, mostly from growing up with a very emotional woman like Daphne. But just as you sometimes don't understand why Ginny and Hermione act the way they do, they don't understand the way you behave at times.*

*I must admit, it's somewhat strange to be having a discussion like this with someone in my head. Maybe Ginny and Hermione were right, and I should worry more about this.*

*I'm not "someone," I'm you*the exasperated voice reminded him. *I'm Harry James Potter, son of James David Potter and Lilly Rose Evans-"*

*I get the point. You are me, and my brain is so scrambled that my own thoughts are talking to me.*

*Something like that. Can you deny that you are thinking more reasonable, acting less impulsively.*

*I can do that myself. I'm not some stupid Gryffindor.*

*Careful, Potter, don't make generalizations.*

*Shut up.*

Harry realized that he'd arrived at Daphne's bedroom. The door was closed. He wasn't sure if he'd gone to the right place, and wondered if he should look for her in the training room, but then he heard Daphne's voice from inside. He tried the doorknob, but found it locked. He actually knew it before his hand touched the handle, something told him that she'd placed a locking charm on the door.

He heard another voice, a low, grave sounding voice. Dumbledore.  
*She didn't put a Silencing Charm on the door...*

Normally, Harry wouldn't even consider eavesdropping on a private conversation between his headmaster and his guardian, but he was so desperate for information, he threw his morals and better judgment to the wayside. *If Daphne catches you, you can always make her feel guilty about not telling you anything. It's manipulative, but you are a Slytherin, aren't you? She's just trying to protect you, a noble sentiment, except for the small problem that you've nearly died twice in the past two years.*

Harry made his decision. *I need to know what is going on.* He placed his ear against the door.

*"...we need to tell him something, Albus," Daphne argued. "He's getting nervous, and anxious. And he's talking to himself often, at least I think he is. It's dangerous if his reaction time is as slow as it has been. He needs to be able to protect himself."*

*"I am fully aware of that, Daphne," Dumbledore replied. "Rest assured, I have additional reason to care about Harry's well-being."*

*What is he talking about? Harry wondered. What other reason is there? I don't think he's talking about my status as the Boy-Who-Lived.*

*Perhaps he is, you'll never know if you don't keep listening, the voice reminded him. He followed its advice.*

*"...are you proposing that we tell him?" Dumbledore asked incredulously. "Two years ago you were as dead set against it as I was, perhaps more so. You didn't want to place such pressure on his shoulders."*

*"And I still don't. But what I want is not important. What is important is that he is prepared, that he understands the burden he will have to carry."*

*"Daphne, we cannot tell him. Not yet. I have seen no signs of Voldemort's imminent return, no stirring in the Dark Forest at all. He was badly weakened when Quirrell was destroyed by the Philosopher's Stone. All the progress he had made was undone."*

*"Albus..."*

*"We cannot tell him the Prophecy, Daphne. He is a mere child."*

*"He is NO child, Albus-*

Harry had heard enough. They were talking about him, all right, speaking of some...prophecy that involved him. Something that Daphne was frightened of telling him. She was trying to protect him, to protect his innocence. *Can she really be so deluded that she believes I have innocence left to protect?*

He considered his options. He could pound on the door and demand to be told the secret, or he could wait, surprise Daphne, and most likely, get more information. It was manipulative...and cruel, to use Daphne's love for him as leverage to get information. It was very *Slytherin*, and in this case, that wasn't necessarily a good thing. It was the kind of thing he'd expect from Malfoy, or Nott, assuming of course, that the former was skilled enough in deception to pull it off.

But if this secret was *that* dangerous, then they had no right to keep it from him. He deserved to know.

*I have earned that right.*

He waited.

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"So I should begin the Occlumency training tomorrow, then?" Daphne asked.

Dumbledore nodded. "I shall speak to Severus about continuing them once the school term begins. I have no doubt that Harry will work hard enough to overcome any past animosity...between you and me, I daresay that Severus has developed a bit of a soft spot for the boy."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Daphne said firmly. "Still, I'm not surprised that Harry's success in potions might be making that man see sense. Harry is not his father, and has not been from the moment he was born. He's a different person. You, me, and the rest of the world knows that, but not Snape."

"Perhaps that will change," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling madly. "Good day, Daphne."

"Good day, Albus."

The fire disappeared. Daphne removing the locking charm on the door, and open it. She froze when she saw Harry standing there, his arms crossed over his chest, his eyes hard and searing.

"Hello Harry," she said, hoping that he wasn't there for the reason that she feared he was.

"You've been hiding something from me," he said coldly, shattering her illusions. "Something important."

"I have," Daphne admitted sheepishly. She looked up at him, matching his intensity. "I would have thought you above eavesdropping, Harry."

Normally, Harry might have ducked his head in shame, or at least flinched. Harry did neither. "One must resort to desperate measures when they are being kept in the dark," he said simply. "After all we've been through, how could you keep something like this from me? For two years?"

Daphne flinched. His anger was justified, of course. *You must deal with the consequences of your actions.* Moody had told her. He'd taken her aside, obviously shaken after his star pupil had succumbed to the temptation of the Unforgivables. Moody had been disappointed, but understanding. In rare show of affection, he'd placed an arm around her shoulders and taught her the most important lesson of her life. *You will sometimes create monsters. It is your duty to destroy them.*

And it was her duty to deal with the consequences of Harry's discovery.

"Before you were born, a Prophecy was made," she began. Harry was listening intently. "It involves both you and Voldemort."

He nodded. She took a deep breath, and then repeated the words that had been seared into her mind ever since she'd heard them from the mouth of Dumbledore during that late-night firecall on October 31st, 1991.

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A/N: And here's another long chapter. Well, quite a bit happens here.

First, Ginny has her long overdue crisis of confidence. Just because she bears it better than Ron does doesn't mean that she doesn't suffer from feelings of inadequacy. You also see how her character is in transition. She's capable of standing up to anyone, but she's also relatively inexperienced. You'd have to be an idiot to expect that that won't change. Innocence is the first casualty of war. I hope you found the floo thing amusing.

Harry's still confused. Very confused. And now he knows that he's *really* powerful. (and again, if you can't accept that the diary wasn't a source of tremendous magical power, I can't help you.) And now he

knows a big secret. And because that secret was kept from him, he distrusts his guardian even more. Poor Harry...

Tonks remains Tonks.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS! I KNOW YOU HAVE  
QUESTIONS! ASK, AND I SHALL ANSWER!

## Chapter 5: Mind Games

“*Legilimens!*” Daphne spoke softly. Normally, her Legilimency was both wandless and nonverbal. To give Harry, an inexperienced Occlumens, a fair chance, she was giving him a fair amount of warning.

As he felt Daphne’s tendrils of Legilimency searching and clawing through his mind, he tried the latest technique he had learned. It was a technique that could be woefully ineffective if it was the first that a beginner Occlumens learned. Harry tried to clear his mind of all emotion, of all conscious thought, of any memories that could distract him, make his mind more vulnerable. *This* was the skill that they’d originally intended Harry to hone by learning the Mind Art, but his new knowledge of the Prophecy added additional importance to it.

He wasn’t succeeding; as they had expected, his condition made the action difficult.

That said, at the moment, the Prophecy was safe. With Dumbledore’s blessing and Harry’s approval (albeit reluctant), she had walled away the memory of the Prophecy in the very back of Harry’s mind. Only the most skillful Legilimens could break through the thick barriers.

There were two consequences, however. First, Harry could no longer remember the text of the Prophecy. He knew that it existed. He knew that it was about himself and Voldemort. And he knew that it was extremely important to keep secret. It was a compromise of sorts, and actually kept Harry from dwelling on the contents...contents that Harry vaguely remembered as being very demanding on him.

The second consequence was that even the most unskilled Legilimens, should they gain access to Harry’s mind, would quickly be able to determine that Harry was hiding *something*. The unnatural barrier that Daphne had created stuck out from the rest of the backdrop of Harry’s mind. Using the library analogy, Daphne compared it to a massive steel vault in the middle of a row of bookshelves; visible to all, and signaling that it had something to hide.

They were playing a game now, a game that would allow Daphne to train her ward without attacking his worst memories. It wasn’t actual

training, so much as preparation for the sessions with Snape, who would not hesitate to go for his worst memories. Specifically, the troll, the feelings of loneliness from his first year, the Stone, Quirrell-Mort's *Crucio*, the attacks, his parents' deaths... and what Daphne had done to him in the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry refocused, changing strategies. Daphne's objective was to find a specific memory. It was not a memory which conjured strong emotions of any kind, and while it certainly wasn't a memory that a real enemy Legilimens would go for either to find their true target or to simple knock him off kilter, his memories of doing a random homework assignment alone in the library from the previous year was the perfect kind of memory to learn the basics with.

Daphne hunted relentlessly. Harry used the first technique he had learned: he thought random, unimportant thoughts, recalled completely unrelated memories. Gaining enough control to consciously divert an enemy from their real objective was the first step. Then came the more difficult task of clearing one's mind, which Harry imagined as trapping an unfriendly Legilimens in a land of fog, where they could see nothing, nor figure out where to go. Eventually, one could reach Daphne's level of skill, and trap a Legilimens by using false memories or ones that appeared to be promising to the mental invader. Daphne also had figurative *barriers*, almost impenetrable. It was especially important for the Grey Maiden, because it was so easy to use her past against her.

*I stand as nearly-not-living testament to that.*

Of course, the greatest step was yet to be taken. If and when he finished his Occlumency training, became skilled enough so that only direct contact with a Legilimens like Voldemort, one of the strongest in recorded history, could break into his mind, Daphne had agreed to give him access to the full contents of the Prophecy. And he would have to understand and cope with that burden. It was a compromise that suited both. Daphne protected the last shreds of Harry's innocence, and Harry had a goal to work towards in his training. He had a motivation, something that would be needed, as from his reading, he knew that gaining the level of skill that he needed would be very difficult, and take at least a year, maybe more. That he would

be receiving it from a man as vindictive and cruel as Severus Snape only made it more difficult.

*But if you train with him, you will be far better prepared for the ultimate test, he had reminded himself. Severus Snape is not Voldemort, but he's much closer to it than a woman reluctant to view your worst memories herself.*

He felt a burst of happiness from the presence in his mind, and then felt it vanish. He opened his eyes and saw that Daphne was smiling brightly. "Excellent, Harry. You've conquered the initial stages of training much quicker than I expected."

"How long did it take you?" Harry asked out of mere curiosity.

Daphne paused. "As you know, Harry, I was going through...a rough time..." *That's the understatement of the century*, Harry thought. *Losing your parents is a nightmare*. A nightmare that Harry suspected he still did not know the full details of. Daphne had told him that Death Eaters had attacked her home. She said that her mother, father and younger brother had been killed. She had not disclosed how or when. Harry somehow knew that the truth was far more gruesome than the edited version she presented. He'd found references to the Attack on O'Connor Sanctuary. They used words like *atrocity...outrage...appalling...revolting...horrific...*

Clearly, Daphne had been so shaken that she never thought about it herself. She was that horrified, that frightened. *And she says that the worst smell in the world is burning flesh...*

Harry had more than a vague idea as to the reasons for that.

"...It took me almost two years," she admitted. Harry was a bit surprised. Two years was a long time for a powerful witch like Daphne to master Occlumency. Lesser witches or wizards could take longer or be entirely incapable of it, but this was one of the first times that Daphne was below-average at anything she did. He imagined that there was a good reason for that.

"Who taught you?" Harry asked.

"Dumbledore," she replied. "After the death of my family, I was...bothered by nightmares."

Harry nodded. *Bothered* probably meant she had been waking up the entire dormitory with her screaming.

"Anyway, I thought it would be good to learn, and it helped me manage my emotions," she continued, her voice strained. "It did."

Harry nodded. "And we're hoping it will do the same for me?"

"No...well, in a way," Daphne said. "Your situation is different than mine was, obviously. You're learning, in part, to help heal the damage in your mind," she said. "But obviously, there is another reason."

"Will that damage be permanent?" Harry asked abruptly. He had to admit that he was in deep trouble if his mental voices persisted. They robbed him of his focus, confused him, and drastically increased his reaction time. Harry knew that he was more vulnerable than he'd ever been.

Daphne had a pained look in her eyes. "I don't know. We don't know. We've never seen this before, Harry," she explained. "You could wake up and be completely healed tomorrow. You may have to deal with it from the rest of your life. It's impossible to tell."

Harry nodded grimly. *I was afraid of that. Not knowing is worse than knowing that I'll have to cope with it the rest of my life.*

*And she is the one responsible*, a voice reminded him, as if to prove a point. *She made you this way.*

*I know.*

"Should we keep going?" Harry asked. "Maybe move onto the next step?"

Daphne shook her head. "We definitely have to practice this skill more. You are doing well, but I want to make sure that you've mastered it before we move on. Occlumency is among the most frustrating areas of magic that you will ever encounter. *Forcing* it

accomplishes nothing, because your emotions are already upset. You need to be patient and calm.”

She looked him over. “No, we’re done for today,” she said, placing her wand back into its holster. “You’re exhausted.”

Harry had to concede the point. Occlumency was very difficult and placed strain on both the mind and the wizard’s magic. Daphne began to walk away. “How did Dumbledore take me knowing the Prophecy?”

Daphne sighed, and ran a hand through her hair, a sign of anxiousness and fatigue. “Not well,” she admitted. “He thought that I should have been more careful, and placed Silencing Charms on the door.”

“He was really determined to keep me from knowing?” Harry asked. It seemed a bit out of character for the Headmaster, who had done little but encourage Harry to mature and grow, from the Invisibility Cloak to urging him to continue training with his friends.

“Yes, he was,” Daphne admitted. “His fears were alleviated somewhat by the mental block I placed on you. We obviously need this Prophecy to remain a secret. You may not remember the contents, but you know how important it is. And you understand the consequences should it fall into the wrong hands.”

“If I fell into the wrong hands,” Harry mumbled. “Which can’t happen, can it?”

“Harry, this isn’t a problem right now. There are Death Eaters still walking among us, but they are leaderless and more engrossed in their own interests than those of their former master,” she said firmly. “At this moment, we don’t have to worry about that.”

Harry nodded. “Fine.”

Daphne sighed. She glanced up at him. “I need to go into Diagon Alley to buy a number of Potions supplies. I was wondering if you wanted to do your school shopping at that time.”

"Potions supplies?" Harry asked.

Daphne nodded. "It's not for you to know..." she paused. "Actually, I take that back. There is something I want you to know, and it involves my sudden interest in Potions. He won't be happy about this, but I won't let you go to school ignorant of it."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked. "Who is 'he'?"

"He is your new Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor. Remus Lupin," Daphne said simply.

Harry was deep in thought. He knew *that* name. He knew that the man had been one of his father's best friends, and the only one that Daphne truly respected. He also knew that the man had not been heard from in over a decade. When Harry had asked, Daphne told him that he'd fled following the deaths of Harry's parents.

"You remember who he is," Daphne said. It was not a question. "Yes, he's back," she said. She sighed. "The two of us did not part on the best of terms. Actually, it's more accurate to say that we never parted at all. You know what happened before your parent's deaths."

Harry nodded. There was no need to speak about Edmond's murder; both knew exactly what she was saying.

"He's been in Egypt all these years, apparently," she continued. "Dumbledore was desperate for a competent Professor...he actually asked me first..." Daphne's smile was almost nostalgic. "I turned him down, of course."

"He asked *you*?" Harry asked incredulously. After all that had happened, how in his right mind could Dumbledore believe that Daphne was best suited to teach *children*? Not that she would hurt them, Harry knew that Daphne had made a mistake and was not *unstable* in the sense that she was dangerous and prone to violent behavior, but that she could even hope to cope with her students when all her focus was on Harry.

"I'm certainly capable of teaching, Harry," Daphne said firmly and a bit coldly. There was a tone of hurt, as if she had sensed Harry's

doubts of her capabilities. Harry supposed that she probably had. "I know a great deal, and I would like to impart my knowledge on others, someday," she said, staring off out the window. She paused, and then turned her attention back to him. "Obviously, I'm in no shape to be a teacher at this moment."

"What does our new Defense teacher have to do with potion ingredients?" Harry asked. "I'm obviously missing something here."

"Yes, you are," Daphne said. "Remus is a werewolf."

Harry knew his jaw was slack, his mouth agape, and his eyes bulging out of their sockets. "A *werewolf*? Dumbledore is hiring a *werewolf* to teach *children*? To teach children *Defense Against the Dark Arts*?"

Daphne chuckled. "It does sound even more ridiculous when you put it that way...anyway, that's where I come in. I'm an adept Potion maker, even if I'm not a Mistress by any means. That said, I'm capable of following instructions and being as precise as is required to brew the Wolfsbane Potion. As the alternative is Snape, and he despises Lupin for...*something*," she said quickly, making it clear that not only was there a long story there, but that she was not getting into it at the present time.

"I see," Harry said. "And Dumbledore feels that you are the best alternative?"

"I *am* the best alternative. Dumbledore was actually prepared to tell Snape to do it. I do care about Remus as an old friend, and I don't trust Severus one inch..."

"You *are* going to have to tell me the story of why you two hate each other so much someday, do you know that?" Harry teased.

To his surprise, Daphne paled and stiffened. "I am never telling you *that* story," she said in a hard, commanding voice. "You don't need to hear it. Rest assured, I might have killed Snape long ago if it weren't for...outside intervention..."

"My mother?" Harry guessed.

Daphne's eyes widened. She was clearly shocked that Harry had figured it out. What had given it away was that she was refusing to make eye contact with him. That typically meant that she was trying to avoid triggering memories of her horrific past. In this case, the color of Harry's eyes reminded her all too much of Lily Potter. "I'll take that as a yes," Harry said.

Daphne closed her mouth, which had been hanging open. "I don't know how you figured that out, Harry, but that is *all* we will discuss about it for now. Understand?"

In no mood for an argument with his guardian, Harry nodded. "Fine. So my teacher's a werewolf? Will he recognize me?"

Daphne jerked back a bit from the unexpected change in conversation. She actually looked a bit afraid. Harry couldn't for the life of him figure out why. *Is she afraid that Remus will hurt me to get back at her? That doesn't make any sense; she said she liked Remus the best of the Marauders...*

"Undoubtedly," she replied smoothly. "You look far too much like James for him not to."

"Do you want me to stay away from him?" Harry asked. Perhaps that was what this was about.

"Of course not," Daphne replied, frowning. "He's a good man, and I'm sure it would be very good of you to have an advocate at school. I merely warn you, he's difficult to get close to. It would help if you let him know that you know what he is immediately; he might be angry with me, but he won't be afraid of yielding his secret. And do not tell anyone, not even your friends. They don't need to know."

"I understand," Harry said. "So I'll be meeting him on September 1st then?"

Daphne nodded. "It's best that way. He needs to get settled in, and you need to heal." Harry could sense there was something else that Daphne was worried about. Another reason that she didn't want him to spend time with Remus Lupin.

"Is there something else bothering you?" Harry asked, showing genuine concern.

"There are a *number* of things bothering me, Harry," Daphne reminded him, straightening her robes absently.

"Why is it that the thought of me spending time around Lupin makes you nervous?" Harry asked. Daphne looked down at the floor. "What, are you afraid you'll *lose* me or something?"

Daphne stiffened. "You are," Harry said incredulously. "You are," He repeated. "How can you even *imagine* that? Daphne, I love you. No matter what you've done to me, you were there when no one else was. You saved me from the Dursley's. You've been as good a mother as I could have asked for." Harry knew that he was speaking each word with the kind of conviction that comes with brutal truth. *She means so much to me. Just because I haven't forgiven her doesn't mean that I want to leave her. I can't imagine that.*

*On that note, I actually have to agree with you.*

*Good to hear.*

"Harry, it's not like that..." she began lamely. Harry cut her off.

"Then what'sit about? He has no legal claim on me. I *want* to stay with you. Who the hell would *he* be to take me from you? It's not like he's been *hiding* for twelve years," Harry argued angrily. He suddenly understood a great deal of his guardian's behavior over the last few days.

"I know that Harry, it's just..." She threw up her hands in frustration. "After what I did to you, I'm afraid that it will be the last straw." She looked back up on him, tears in her eyes. "*That* is what's been haunting my dreams. I keep having nightmares about people coming to take you away from me...and knowing that it's entirely my fault..."

It was not the first time in this long, dreadful summer that Harry had felt that his and Daphne's roles had been reversed. He got off the chair and wrapped his arms around her waist. "It's not going to happen," he said clearly. One of Daphne's hands ran through his hair

affectionately, the other encircled his back. He backed away and looked straight into the taller woman's eyes. "I won't *let* it happen."

---

It was time. He'd waited. He'd starved himself to prepare for this moment. He'd subtly disposed of the meager ration that the prisoners were given to ward off temptation. The Aurors that oversaw the Dementors seemed content that he'd reached the point that many of the prisoners eventually did, and simply lost the will to live. *Think what you will, I'm going to make history*, he thought solemnly. *I'm doing it for Harry. I'm going to take care of him, James. I'm going to do my duty as godfather. No Potter will ever succumb to the Darkness, that I promise you.*

Sirius Orion Black was still not entirely sure that his plan would work. One thing he *did* know was that this would be his one and only shot. If he ran into an Auror, they would immediately remember that there were no animals of any type on Azkaban, and make the reasonable assumption. After all, stranger things had happened.

The time had arrived. He looked around the barren, bleak prison cell, as if trying to memorize every feature despite the fact that twelve long years of unjust incarceration had permanently seared every inch of the cell into his memory. He took in, for what he hoped was the last time, the gray stone of the floor, the masonry spider-webbed with small cracks. The mold and dirt covered blackened stone walls that made up his prison. The solitary barred window that overlooked the bleak, rocky landscape of this miserable place. The niche carved into the rock wall that was just deep enough to be called a bed. He'd smacked his head on the ceiling of it so many times after waking from a Dementor-induced nightmare.

So many times, in fact, that'd he'd stood upright in his cell, heckling the passing Aurors, for two days until one of them had chosen between hexing him (which could cost him his job; it was illegal to attack prisoners) and helping him. He grudgingly conjured a stone tablet that Sirius had used as a replacement bed. *Naturally, he forgot the nice warm sheets and soft pillow*, Sirius griped. *Focus, bloody focus, Padfoot*, he chastised himself. *You have somewhere to be going, no?*

He walked slowly, innocently to the door of his cell. The halls were empty. From the fact that the cell was getting even colder, he knew the Dementors would soon be here. Bellatrix was probably wetting herself from excitement.

*Damn it, that inbred bitch might see me, he realized abruptly. I'll have to go out the other way, and just hope I can make it out. The Dementors are blind, that won't be a problem. The Aurors might be.*

The time had arrived. Calling upon the magic he had by sheer force of will kept in reserve, safe from the magic-sucking abilities of the Dementors, he focused on his animagus form and released the reservoir. He smiled as he saw fur begin to sprout from his hands. He felt the vaguely uncomfortable feeling of his bones shifting, shrinking in some places, morphing in others. He fell to all fours. Seconds later, Padfoot stood where Sirius Black had moments earlier.

*Time to go, he told himself. Then he pushed his head through the bars. He was only just thin enough, but his days of voluntary starvation paid off. He was free!*

*Not yet. Get off this cursed island, then I'm free.*

Hugging the shadows, Padfoot crept silently on all fours down the corridor. There was no sign of life anywhere. It was night, but still, it made him nervous that he hadn't seen an Auror...

*Well, are you just going to stand there and marvel at your good fortune? Or actually take advantage of it?*

Sirius chose the latter. He moved quicker now, and came upon his first group of Dementors. Five of them. Even in dog form, the memories threatened to well up. He forced them down by letting the dog instincts take over. He gave it just one command. *Find the water.*

Padfoot passed through the Dementors, which barely spared him a cursory glance. Sirius realized that it would be damn near impossible to get out through the front gate. Then he noticed something. A hole in the masonry, likely some kind of sewage drain or something. He could see moonlight beyond it. *Am I thin enough?*

It didn't really matter. He squeezed his rail-thin body into the hole, which had obviously been covered by a grate at some point. He fell a short distance. He was in a pipe of some sort. He quickly advanced towards freedom...

And found himself standing at the end of the pipe, which had apparently been carved into the face of a sheer cliff. . Below him were jagged rocks. Beyond that was the sea. *To jump or not to jump.*

*Jump.*

Sirius backed up in the pipe, and got a running start. He leapt at the last possible moment, praying that he wouldn't hit the rocks and end his escape attempt in a decidedly messy fashion. *Oh what a way to go out.*

He didn't have to bother. He cleared the rocks by over two feet, and crashed into the freezing waters of the North Sea.

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The portkey deposited Remus Lupin onto the ground rather gently. Remus had forced himself to relax, which probably aided his uneventful landing. He brushed off his patched and frayed robes, robes that he had purchased over fifteen years ago. It was impossible to tell, but they were his slightly Transfigured seventh year robes. He was fortunate that he'd completed his growth spurt prior to buying them. After his mother had been killed in a Death Eater raid on her village, he'd discovered just how desperate they had really been. His mother had concealed their money problems, caused by a low-paying job as the assistant at the Diagon Alley Apothecary, and the strain of paying for her only son's Hogwarts education.

Remus had never known his father. Well, that wasn't really true, but as he couldn't remember anything from before he was Bitten, he couldn't even recall the man's face. He'd run off, frightened by what his son had become. Angela Lupin had not kept a single photograph of him. Remus had no idea if the man was dead or wildly successful. He really didn't care.

Tearing his mind away from his past, Lupin instead gazed out upon the mostly unchanged Hogwarts Grounds. Dumbledore's portkey had

actually deposited him inside the wards, something that could only happen when the Headmaster himself created the portkey.

Remus smiled. In front of him, looking fairly harmless, were the gnarled and twisted branches of the Whomping Willow. Remus was among the only ones that knew that by touching the knot on the east face of the tree, the tree would be frozen, allowing access to the tunnel burrowed into the earth beneath the tree. That tunnel, in turn, led into 'the most haunted building in Britain.' Remus smiled grimly. *I never knew that I was so well-known.*

*The question, Remus thought, is which are they more scared of? The malevolent ghosts or the fact that every full moon their village was graced by the presence of a transformed werewolf.*

Remus thought it would probably be the latter. Most wizards and witches were terrified of werewolves, mostly because they had the almost unique capability to spread their incurable disease to others. *Curse, disease, affliction, it all means the same thing*, Remus thought. *It's something that has ruined many lives and made others very difficult. I am a dangerous creature, through no fault of my own.*

The problem, Remus knew, lay in the people that refused to believe that werewolves could be normal witches and wizards on all but one day of the month. It was true that a number of werewolves, such as the infamous Fenrir Greyback, had embraced their violent side, lusting for blood even without the aid of the full moon. But that was a small portion of the werewolf community. Most werewolves hated what they had become, and actively sought to be productive members of the community. They were in fact *better* behaved than non-werewolves, because they were afraid of rejection, hatred, and fear.

That said, Remus knew that there was one man that did fear him specifically for what he was. He was also a man that Remus believed had a perfectly good reason to. Severus Snape could certainly be forgiven for hating and fearing him after he'd nearly killed the Slytherin in a horrifically thoughtless prank of Sirius's. Not thoughtless simply because it was cruel, but because Sirius had not given one thought as to the consequences. Had it not been for James getting

cold feet, he probably would have killed Snape, been executed for his crime, and had his best friends expelled. Hell, Dumbledore might even have been sacked for allowing a werewolf to attend Hogwarts in the first place.

Remus gazed out over the grounds, taking in the landscape, the grassy hills, the covered bridge that led to Hogwarts over the ravine near Hagrid's hut and the Forbidden Forest, and, of course, the castle itself. Hogwarts rose magnificently from the earth, its stone spires jutting towards the sky. It was early morning, and the rising sun shone off of the windows. He could see the path that led into Hogsmeade in the distance.

Unable to wait any longer, Remus began the trek up one of the hills. He reached the smaller lake just inside the forest. He continued to walk up one of the stone paths leading up the rocky bluffs towards the southeast corner of the castle. He reached the top and headed for the entrance. The massive oak doors were slightly ajar, as if inviting him in. He slipped through the sizable gap, and found himself in the Entrance Hall. He looked around in awe. In front of him above the marble staircase that led to the First Floor and the main chamber where the moving staircases took the denizens of the castle to the various towers and hallways.

Hogwarts was an example of wizard engineering. The principle mantra was 'It doesn't matter if it's not physically possible. We have Magic.'

Remus had laughed the first time he'd heard his mother repeat the phrase. He still found it strangely amusing. Hogwarts was, in fact, constantly changing. Not merely the direction of the staircases or the portraits on the walls, but the very dimensions of the castle itself. James had heard rumors of a mysterious room on the seventh floor that would provide anything that a person needed, and expand to any size. James had spent the better part of his sixth year searching, but found nothing.

As he thought about his departed best friend, he also realized that James's son, his own flesh and blood, now called the castle his home ten months of each year. It wasn't as though he had forgotten, but it

hadn't really hit him until now. Every day, he would have an opportunity to catch sight of Harry James Potter. *Maybe it will be just like having James back...*

As soon as he thought those nostalgic thoughts, he hammered them out of existence. *What kind of fool are you, Lupin?* He asked himself. *The boy is a Slytherin, not a Gryffindor. In all likelihood, he's absolutely nothing like James. How can you possibly expect that of him? He is his own person. Perhaps you will get along, perhaps you won't. Either way, treating him like James is a surefire way to fail.*

"What are you doing here?" a voice snarled from his left. Remus smiled. He would have known that voice anywhere. Dumbledore had told him in a letter than Severus Snape was the Potions Professor. Remus wasn't surprised. It was convenient, in a way. As he was in the employ of Dumbledore, Snape, the only person that both knew his secret and would share it if he got the chance, besides a few Death Eaters, would be unable to undermine him in that way. He feared they'd have to track him down and insure his silence. That would not be necessary.

"Hello Severus," Remus said, turning to face him. "It has certainly been a long time."

"*What are you doing here?*" he repeated in deathly quiet voice.

"Surely you've been told?" Remus said incredulously. Snape's demeanor clearly said otherwise. "Well, you've at least noticed that you are a professor short?"

Snape did not react. "What does that have to do...No," he snarled angrily, his black eyes darkening. "No, you *cannot* be here for *that*."

Remus met his eyes. Werewolves were immune to Legilimency, a natural defense mechanism that prevented the wolf from losing control of his host during full moon. The origins of Lycanthropy were unknown, but it was suspected that wizards created it. This suspicion was mostly due to the fact that Lycanthropy was like no other disease or curse in the world.

Snape was livid. “*That bumbling...foolish...idiotic...*” he growled between clenched teeth.

“I suppose we are colleagues, then?” Remus asked offhandedly. Snape looked murderous.

As he began yelling, Remus sighed. *I'm home.*

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“I'll be able to take care of myself,” Harry assured her for the umpteenth time. He and Daphne stood at the entrance to Diagon Alley. Harry had combed his fringe down over his scar to minimize recognition. Also, he had put his Metamorphmagus abilities to practical use for the first time. With his magic contained, it was a simple matter to change his hair color to brown and his eye color to blue.

Harry could obviously still recognize himself, and knew that if someone wasn't focusing on his normal appearance, that someone that he knew well enough could still identify him. Unfortunately, he still hadn't progressed to the point where he could change his bone structure. Daphne was wearing a hooded cloak, which made her difficult to identify. It was a typical wet London afternoon, with overcast skies, the clouds overhead threatening rain, and the air very damp and heavy. It was a bit chilly for August as well. Daphne's attire did not look out of place.

Harry had reluctantly agreed to get his school things without Hermione and Ginny, both of whom were going in a few days. Daphne seemed insistent on doing it now, so they did.

“Alright,” she finally said. “Just keep a low profile, and touch the stone on your ring if you run into trouble. I'll apparate to your location.”

“Sounds good,” Harry said, giving his guardian's hand a reassuring squeeze. “I'm going to Gringott's first, refill my money bag. Your vault or mine?”

Daphne stared at him for a moment. "Mine, of course. Your parents' gold is for when you come of age. I took you in, I'm paying for you." She sounded confused.

"I wasn't implying anything by it," Harry explained a little irritably. "But I think that I should use my own money. Is that alright with you?"

Daphne hesitated. "Fine," she said. "In the event you need it..."

"You'll give me anything," Harry finished. "Thank you."

Harry left Daphne and walked towards the white stone building of Gringotts. His disguise appeared to be working well enough, as he strolled down Diagon Alley without incident. He walked into the well-lit, high-ceilinged building and towards the first available goblin. The creature glanced up at him, but didn't greet him in any fashion. Harry stood and waited patiently as the goblin completed his review of the papers in front of him and slowly, painstakingly put them back in their proper cabinets. Harry knew that he was being tested; a wizard that disdained goblins would have started screaming for attention by now. When then creature approached, he wore a toothy smile. "Thank you for waiting, sir." His tone made it quite clear that he was not grateful in the least.

"I only did as you expected," Harry replied.

The goblin raised an eyebrow. "Actually, I expected much more rude behavior. I'm pleasantly surprised to see that I was wrong. What is your business?"

Harry glanced around, but no one was looking at him. "Are you trying to hide something, sir?" the goblin asked in a falsely sympathetic voice. "Remember that all Gringotts transactions are strictly confidential."

Harry closed his eyes and with the tingle of magic, felt his eyes and hair resume their normal colors. He opened his eyes to see the goblin staring at him in a calculating manner. "Interesting, Mr. Potter," he said quietly. "We were not aware of *that* particular ability. I assume you'll want to see Griphook, your account manager?"

Harry nodded simply, than disguised himself again. After a moment, a familiar looking goblin approached, wearing a toothy grin. "Mr. Potter," Griphook said in greeting. "I have been informed that you are a Shape-Shifter. Quite interesting."

"And useful," Harry replied. "Do you need further confirmation of who I am?"

"A simple glance at your forehead will do," the goblin replied. Harry granted it to him. "Excellent," he said, as Harry smoothed his hair back over his scar. "That type of marking cannot be duplicated by a glamour charm or with your ability. You cannot rid yourself of it either."

"Apparently not," Harry said.

"Yes, well, do you have your key?" the goblin asked. Harry shook his head. "Pity," he said, though he obviously didn't care. "It's blood again, then?"

Harry shrugged. He boarded the cart with Griphook and remained silent during the journey. He had a feeling that Griphook wasn't in the mind to chat with a thirteen-year old wizard.

He reached his vault and opened it by allowing the door to draw a sample of his blood. After filling his moneybag, they re-boarded the cart. The return trip back was uneventful, but as Harry stepped out of the cart, Griphook broke the silence. "We know, Mr. Potter," he said simply.

Harry spun to face him. "*What?*"

"You know what I am speaking of," Griphook said. "Goblins know a great deal more than what wizards give them credit for. We know about your power and what has been done to it." He moved closed to Harry, and extended a thin arm. Harry was shocked by the gesture. "You have shown wisdom beyond your years, Mr. Potter," the goblin said. Harry reached out his own hand and firmly shook Griphook's. The goblin was careful not to injure Harry with his claws. His firm handshake belied the anxiousness he was feeling. The kind of trust

and acceptance that Griphook was showing him was almost unprecedented.

"I have sought to learn about your people, to understand you," Harry said as smoothly as he could. "I know that a piece of literature on the subject written by a wizard is likely incomplete, but..."

"You are correct, Mr. Potter," Griphook replied. "The book you found is slightly inaccurate at spots. Still, it is remarkably better than the rest."

Harry didn't even bother trying to figure out how Griphook knew which book he was referring to.

"I understand how valuable you really are," Harry said. "At least, in terms of finances. I have read that you are fearsome warriors as well."

"We pride ourselves in being exactly that, Mr. Potter," Griphook replied. "We have not fought with wizards for over millennia. The last time we did, they did *not* reward our loyalty." He paused, possibly for effect. It seemed as if this entire speech had been planned out. That said, Harry believed the goblin was being honest. "We expect *great* things of you, Mr. Potter. We have reason to believe that you are the one that some of our greatest Prophets have referred to. We shall see if we are correct. I would say that you have...a great chance at this point."

"Thank you," Harry finally choked out. The goblin chuckled quietly at his nervousness.

"All in good time, of course. You are but a child, in years, at least, if not in experience." Harry was starting to wonder if there was anything the goblins did *not* know.

"Sir..."

"I have said enough," Griphook said, cutting him off. "You have shown us respect. Continue to do so, and we may heed your call someday...also, you will not speak of this conversation with *anyone*, not even your guardian. The Council of Elders was reluctant to allow

me to tell you this much, but they agreed. You should be honored, Mr. Potter."

"I am," Harry assured him. He knew that he was sweating badly right now, and his composure was close to crumbling. He was still in shock from what the goblin had said about his destiny...and how much the entire species seemed to know about him. *Merlin, I can only pray that wizards never realize how monumentally stupid they have been, subjugating goblins as they have. They know enough to wipe us out in they feel like it.*

"You fear us?" Griphook said, as if sensing his thoughts. "Good. Fear commands respect. The wizarding world gives us precious little of both."

With that, Griphook walked away into the darkness, leaving Harry alone in the tunnel. He had a feeling that Daphne would never be able to find the memory of this conversation. Griphook clearly wasn't intimidated by her sensitivity to other's thoughts and emotions.

As if that wasn't enough, Harry ran into yet another familiar person just outside the bank. "Potter," a voice said simply. Harry glanced into an alleyway, and saw a cloaked figure emerge. He lowered his hood, and Harry found himself staring into the dark eyes of a tall Black boy with high cheek bones and wearing a calculating expression.

"Zabini," Harry countered. Obviously, his fears about someone that knew him being able to recognize him were legitimate. He didn't even spend that much time with Blaise.

"Wearing a disguise, Potter?" Blaise asked, stepping into the light. "Surely you could do better than that with a pair of Glamour Charms."

"It isn't a Glamour," Harry replied with a mysterious smile. "What do you want?"

"I've come to...well, to warn you of something. You aren't in danger...yet," he said cryptically. Harry met his eyes and waited, and Blaise gave up. "I've overheard many conversations with my parents. As you *probably* know, the Zabini's are a respected, unaffiliated pureblood family. We have many connections."

"Yes, I did," Harry said, very grateful that he'd spent the time he had researching his classmates. Something told Harry that he didn't want to look like a fool.

*No, I don't think you do.*

Harry ignored the voice. Blaise continued. "This may or may not come as a surprise to you, Potter, but they are very...*interested in you.*"

"How so?" Harry asked curiously.

"They know that you are a young wizard of exceptional intelligence and outstanding skill for your age...well, they aren't quite *that* complimentary, but that's the gist," Blaise said. "They believe that there is something about you that allowed you to defeat the Dark Lord. They believe you to be unusually powerful, and are following your progress closely."

Harry was amused for a moment. The purebloods were completely wrong...yet completely correct at the same time. He was abnormally powerful. But he had not been until this year. There was something special about him that allowed him to deflect Voldemort's curse. But it was not because of him, rather, it was because of his mother.

*I would recommend letting them believe what they will. Use their inaccurate knowledge to your advantage.*

"Perhaps," Harry replied. Blaise didn't look in the least bit irritated, though Harry knew that was not the true reality. He was frustrating his classmate. He was proud of himself for a moment. He was winning a Slytherin war of words and knowledge.

"But that's not all," Blaise continued. "You are on a slippery slope, Potter," he said. "Your condition is well-known, of course. The purebloods are intrigued, but if you show signs of weakness, they may look elsewhere. You have an opportunity, Potter. Rarely does a wizard of your age command their attention." Harry knew that Blaise was telling him the absolute truth.

"Why?" Harry asked. Blaise understood what he was asking.

"Why tell you this?" Blaise asked. "Perhaps it's because I like you, or see something worthy in you. You *are* a half-blood, yet you are still making your way into their dinner conversations."

"Thank you, Zabini," Harry replied. "I appreciate this knowledge."

Blaise nodded, then vanished back into the alleyway. Harry supposed it was an Illusion of some sort. He'd heard rumors that the boy's father was an Illusionist. Perhaps he'd taught things to his son.

Harry was deeply unnerved by the two conversations he had had. His mind was racing, and multiple voices were offering advice, so many that he could not understand a single one of them. *Don't show signs of weakness? How the hell am I supposed to do that?*

Harry entered Flourish and Blotts, and began looking for his schoolbooks. He found them simply enough, using the list he'd been given by Professor McGonagall before he left Hogwarts. He noted that the Defense booklist was primarily focused on Dark creatures. Harry wondered if that was related to the standard curriculum or Remus Lupin's unique...condition.

He had gathered his books and was making his way forward to pay for them when he was recognized again. It was by one of the most unlikely people imaginable. "Hello Harry Potter," a dreamy voice called out softly. Harry turned to see Luna Lovegood seated on a bench next to one of the bookcases. In her lap was an upside-down magazine. At her feet was a basket that was stuffed with her schoolbooks. Harry took in the girl's strange appearance.

Luna was shorter than most girls, and had wavy hair of a color Harry could best identify as 'dirty blonde.' Her protuberant blue eyes were sparkling with curiosity. She wore a necklace of butterbeer caps and radish earrings. Her attire was a blue and yellow robe that was constantly shifting shades. Her wand was tucked behind her right ear, and she was humming quietly. Harry couldn't recognize the tune.

"Hello Luna," Harry said. "I see you recognized me."

"I can see *past* what you *look like*, Harry Potter," she replied impatiently. Then her dreamy look returned. "I can see a *lot* of things."

"I'm sure you can," Harry replied. It came out a bit ruder than he'd intended. Luna didn't seem to notice. "What are you reading?"

"The *Quibbler*," she said simply. "Father is the editor."

Harry knew of the publication. Daphne thought it trash.

"I see," Harry said.

Luna smiled at him. "You shouldn't be so nervous, you know," she said, leaning towards him. Harry was very unnerved. "A lot is expected of you, but you'll get there."

Harry just stared at her, mouth agape. The goblins were one thing, but *Luna*?

"I *told* you," she said. "I see *many* things. It's nice to meet someone as confused as I am. But what really puzzles me is why *you* haven't fixed it. I *like* being confused; it makes me different. But *you* don't, and *you* aren't used to it."

"Daphne's trying," Harry said, still wondering how she knew these things.

"I just do," she replied nonchalantly, picking up the *Quibbler* and reading it upside down. She pulled her wand from behind her ear, and traced something on the page. "Yes, *that* makes sense..."

Harry didn't know what she was doing, but he sensed that she might be able to help him. "Do you know anything else about what's wrong with me?"

"You shouldn't say it like *that*," she replied. "It makes it seem like a *bad* thing...which, I suppose, for you, it *is*."

She put away the *Quibbler*, and stretched, yawning slightly. "You know, Father gets awful headaches sometimes. *Migraines*, they call them...of course, they don't know..."

"Know what?" Harry asked.

"It's just what happens when his brain is out of order," she said simply, as if speaking about the weather. "My brain is a mess, but I like it like that. He doesn't, so it hurts him." She smiled. "I tidy up his mind, and he feels all better...he told me not to tell *anyone*, though." She paused, then seemed to dismiss something. "But you aren't just *anyone*...do you want me to help?"

Harry was a bit anxious. *What if she makes it worse?*

*Odds are that's she's loony and won't do anything*, a voice reminded him.

Luna stretched her arms out and placed her hands on Harry's temples. "Hold still, please," she said. She took a deep breath. Harry felt a strange presence *inside* of his mind. He wanted to fight it, but decided not to. He began to feel more relaxed. It was like a veil had been lifted from his eyes. He saw things more *clearly*.

Luna opened her eyes and removed her hands. "All better," she said simply.

Harry gaped at her. "What did you *do*?" he asked breathlessly.

Luna frowned at him. "It was so easy," she said. "Did you know that your mind looks like a library?" Harry nodded, Daphne had said something similar. "Well, that makes sense; you spend so much *time* there...anyway, all the books were knocked out of the shelves. There were holes in the floor." She smiled. "I fixed them."

"I'm cured?" Harry asked incredulously.

Luna shook her head. "Not *cured*, because it wasn't a *disease*. You are *complete* again."

"No more random thoughts, no more voices?" Harry asked hopefully.

"We *all* think random thoughts," Luna pointed out. "But no more voices. You might *miss* them; mine are good company."

Harry knew that she was telling the truth. Somehow, someway, she had undone the damage that Daphne had wrought. The girl that

everyone in the school considered strange at best and unbalanced at worst had *healed* him. "How can I repay you?" he asked breathlessly.

"I could use someone to talk to once in a while," Luna admitted. "I get *lonely* sometimes, and only Ginny talks to me. But she doesn't *understand* me. I think *you* do...oh, and be *watchful*," she added. "Things are in motion."

With that, she hopped off the bench and walked away, leaving Harry staring after her. For once, no voices offered advice.

Harry exited the bookstore in a daze. He saw his guardian racing towards him. Her hood was gone, and her face was deathly pale. Her eyes were wide and frightened. Harry smiled at her. He couldn't stop beaming.

"Daphne—"

"Later, Harry," she said quickly. "We've got to leave now; it isn't safe."

"What?"

She grabbed him by the shoulders. "I was just contacted by Andromeda," she said quickly. "Sirius Black has escaped from Azkaban."

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A/N: And the answer to the question you've all been waiting for is...*Luna*? Yes, it is. She's a *bit* more than just comic relief in this series. That was just one of her many mental abilities. They *will* be further explained eventually. It's my take on why Luna became so strange after her mother died.

You also saw how Harry is finding it harder and harder to escape his destiny, even without full knowledge of the Prophecy. He understands what it connotes, but Daphne's solution was for the best. Harry can begin preparing without the full pressure, he understands how important he is, and it gives him a goal to work towards in his Occlumency training. A big part of why Harry failed in canon was because he didn't have a clear goal. It was 'get rid of the nightmares.' Nightmares he still wanted to see.

I hope you like what I'm doing with the goblins. They will be essential to Harry's eventual victory. And Harry's fair treatment of them is really *that* unusual.

A note on the description of Hogwarts. A few of you have expressed concern that I'm going with the movies and video games over the books. That is true. I'm a visual learner, and A) DespiteRowling's creative genius, her major failing is a lack of description (in *my* opinion, not everyone else's) and B) like I said, I'm a visual learner, and I can better understand images than words. I actually saw the PS movie first, and I'm glad I did. When I read the next four books, I was able to visualize what the characters and settings look like, and I enjoyed the books more. That may seem odd, but there you go. With a few notable exceptions (like Barty Crouch in GoF), I'm going with the movies. Oh, and I was making fun of Daniel Radcliffe with Harry's choice of disguise. I still cannot believe that they allow him to play a character who's hair and eyes are repeatedly described as jet-black and green, respectively. BTW, the layout of Hogwarts and the grounds is based on the Harry Potter Lexicon.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS! I MUST HAVE REVIEWS!

## Chapter 6: Betrayer of the Light

Daphne refused to let Harry ask what was going on until they had apparated onto the property of Dressler Manor and were safely inside. While Daphne paced around the room like a caged tiger, Harry waited expectantly beside the fireplace, his arms crossed over his chest. He had two things he needed to address with his guardian, but he wanted to know about the potential danger first. He waited for her to calm down.

Finally, Harry asked the question that had been on the tip of tongue. “Why are you so frightened that Sirius Black has escaped from Azkaban?”

Daphne turned to face him. Her face was pale, but her expression was that of confusion, as if she couldn’t *believe* that Harry was treating it as nothing. “Harry, do you know who Sirius Black was? Did I ever explain his connection to you?”

“I know that he was an Auror. I know that he betrayed my parents and murdered Peter Pettigrew and a bunch of Muggles. I know that he knew my father,” Harry said. “That’s all I could find in the books I own.”

Daphne looked like she was ready to slap herself. “*Merlin*, I haven’t told you *anything!*”

Harry stared at her. “What is there to tell?”

Daphne took a deep breath. “Sirius Black was more than just an acquaintance of James Potter; the man was like his *brother*. James’s parents more or less adopted Black after he ran away from home.”

Harry frowned. “I know that the Blacks are one of the most powerful and legendary Dark Families in existence, but...”

“That’s an understatement,” Daphne cut him off. “There are *other* Dark families: the Greengrasses, the Bullstrodes, just to name a few you’re familiar with. There are quite of few of them, actually.” She paused. “But the Blacks are *the* Dark pureblood family. They are the oldest recorded family. They are also *the* case against inbreeding;

there are a *number* of incestual relationships on record. Many of them are insane. Andromeda and Tonks seem to have side-stepped *that* unfortunate gene."

"Maybe..." Harry said with a smile, thinking of his 'big sister.'

"This is *hardly* a laughing matter, Harry," Daphne told him firmly. Her expression softened. "You are thinking of Nymphadora, of course."

Harry nodded. "Go on."

Daphne took another deep breath. "It became obvious that your family was in danger several months before...they were killed," she said softly, obviously fighting her emotions down at the same time. "The beginning of the Prophecy was leaked to Voldemort somehow, we suspect by a spy. Dumbledore knows who it was, but he won't tell me."

"He *knows?*" Harry replied incredulously.

Daphne nodded. "He's protecting him. Why? I don't know." She paused. "The point is that your parents went into hiding. To prevent their being found, they used a Fidelus Charm cast by Lily...you know what that is, correct?"

"You explained it to me when I was younger," Harry reminded her. "You *didn't* tell me who the Secret Keeper was..." Harry trailed off. Something clicked into place, and he looked up at her. "It *was* Black, wasn't it? My father trusted him and he betrayed my parents."

Daphne nodded.

"*He* is the reason they are dead," Harry said darkly. "And now he has escaped? Has that ever happened *before?*"

Daphne shook her head, running a hand through her hair. "No," she said quietly. "This is *unprecedented*."

Harry suddenly understood at least part of the reason that Daphne was so panicked. "He's coming after *me*, isn't he?" Harry said quietly. "He wants to *finish the job...*"

Daphne nodded again. She seemed completely lost for words. "Andromeda contacted me...we have these," she said, indicating the silver bracelet she wore on his right wrist. Harry had noticed it, but never thought much of it.

"Black family heirloom?" Harry asked. Daphne nodded.

"She got them as a little girl, before she married and they cast her out. They heat up when you want to communicate with the other. I know the owner of the Apothecary, and she allowed me to use her floo," Daphne explained. "Andromeda was transferred, by the way," she added. "You know how she worked at St. Mungo's?" Harry nodded. "Well, a combination of her good work and her daughter's Auror training convinced Amelia Bones to take her as her new secretary. That's how she knew."

"Will she get in trouble for leaking secrets like that?" Harry asked.

"Probably not," Daphne said. "It pertained directly to both of us and Andromeda said they were likely going to send us a warning soon anyway. She said she'll tell Amelia it isn't necessary."

Harry frowned. "How do you know that he's after me? He's probably deranged after twelve years with the Dementors."

Daphne stared straight at him, her gaze hard and fierce. Protectiveness was practically radiating off her. "Black has been whispering in his sleep; most prisoners do. He was also not eating. They thought that meant that he was losing the will to live. It looks like he was getting thin enough to somehow get through the bars of his cell." She paused. "There is one other thing that I told Andromeda that will be *very* valuable information for the Aurors. Black is an unregistered animagus: he transforms into a large black dog."

Harry suddenly remembered *something* buried deep within his mind. He must have been less than a year old, but he could remember a massive, black, fuzzy creature, licking his face with a giant pink tongue as he squealed with amusement. The memory froze his blood.

"You remember," Daphne said, her eyes sympathetic. "He used to play with you all the time. I never could have imagined that he'd turn

traitor. I *didn't* like him, but he..." she paused and Harry was surprised to see tears glistening in Daphne's eyes. "...he was a good man...if a bit *immature* at times." She really was crying now, and laughed slightly. "He actually *fancied* me at one point," she said.

Harry was a bit surprised by *that*, but wasn't particularly interested. "What made him do it? What made him betray them like that?"

Daphne shook her head, wiping away her tears. "I don't know. I just don't know. It didn't...and still doesn't...make any sense."

Harry frowned. "He would know me, then?" he asked.

Daphne nodded, then cringed, as if she was about to say something unpleasant. "The man was...and I suppose still is...your bloody *Godfather*..."

Harry recoiled in revulsion. His *Godfather*? Sirius Black, a man who had betrayed Harry's parents to their deaths, endangered his Godson, and murdered another of his best friends, killed about a dozen innocent Muggles, and had spent the last twelve years in Azkaban was his *Godfather*? The thought sickened him, made him physically ill. To be *related* in any way to a *Death Eater*? He suddenly had a new appreciation for Dean Thomas, whose mother's brother-in-law happened to be Addison Jugson, who had been one of Black's fellow prisoners.

Then he frowned, remembering something Daphne had mentioned earlier. "What's important about his whispering?" he asked.

Daphne paled and stared out the window. Initially, Harry thought it was because she was fighting down her despair and sorrow. When he looked closely at Daphne's eyes, he was surprised to see that they were blazing with *rage*. "He was talking about you," she said in a strained voice. "All he talked about was you. He called you by name. He called *me* by name."

She closed her eyes, and took several deep, calming breaths. "I want you to swear something to me, Harry," she said, gazing deep into his eyes. "And I *will* know if you are lying. Swear on Merlin's name that you will not go looking for Sirius Black." The intensity in her eyes, the

protectiveness and love that Harry saw was astounding. He hadn't erred in his earlier estimation that *he* was the only thing that kept her going. "*I will not bury another loved one,*" she vowed softly, but with a fearsome edge behind it that left no doubt as to the depth of her resolve.

Harry took a deep breath. *Whatever she may have done to me, the damage is repaired. The relationship may not be; may never be. But I can do this for her. For both of our sakes.* "I swear it," he said firmly.

Daphne nodded. It was an agreement forged in blood, bound by steel. It was a vow that Harry had no intention of breaking.

"I promise, Harry," Daphne began, "that I will bring Black to justice, or see it done," she said firmly. "If I find him before the Aurors or Hit-Wizards do, I *will* kill him," she said with as much commitment as Harry had given her in the promise he had just made. "He deserves nothing less."

Harry nodded grimly.

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*The disadvantage of having everyone think that you are dead, Peter Pettigrew thought, is that you have to make sure they continue to think that.*

At this moment, the man who had spent the better part of twelve years transformed as a fat, balding grey rat, been the pet of two redheads, the lab rat for two others, and had gone so long without speaking that he wouldn't be surprised if his vocal cords were *rusted* from disuse.

*It's better than being dead, though. Or in Azkaban, like Sirius.*

Another thing about spending twelve years as a seemingly innocent rat was that he had only himself to talk to. It had taken him a long time to accept his reasons for betraying Lily, James, and Sirius. He'd felt guilty, angry with himself from being guilty, despaired and horrified that he *might* have made the wrong choice, frustration that he couldn't ask anyone for help, and finally, furious with himself for ever doubting his loyalties.

*The Dark Lord gave me much more than I ever had. He valued me, valued me as a vital resource in his war effort. He viewed me as no different than the rest of his servants. We all serve beneath him and reap the rewards. James and Sirius kept me around for their own ego gratification. Remus kept me around out of pity.*

*And Alecto and Amycus; they liked me. They thought some of my ideas were brilliant. They taught me the Unforgivables. They had faith in my abilities. They talked to me, helped me get better at eavesdropping and spying. They made me into something that the Dark Lord though was important. I was never important to Dumbledore. All James and Sirius did was trick me into thinking that I was accepted. They manipulated me. After my father died, did they console me? No, they ignored me. Bloody bastards.*

*And the Dark Lord will return. I know, I can feel it. He isn't gone forever. He will rise, and I will reap the spoils of his victory. I'll stand upon the graves of my 'friends' and laugh.*

This he knew...most of the time, at least. He still doubted himself, but he knew that he couldn't afford it. He was committed. The die was cast, and there was no going back.

The sunrise over Stoatshead Hill was as brilliant as it was blinding. Peter shielded his eyes with a Disillusioned hand. He knew that he had plenty of time. While his former 'master,' Percy awoke early and promptly, and was very attentive and difficult to trick, Ron was a heavy sleeper, snored loud enough to wake the dead, and paid little or no attention to his surroundings. It was very easy to sneak away to watch the sunset. It gave him time to stretch his human body, to think without being impeded by his rodent instincts or senses.

As part of his spying, he'd been taught how to cast a wandless Disillusionment Charm on himself. It, along with his animagus form, was perhaps his crowning achievement. The Dark Lord had been very pleased when he'd managed it. He could even use it when in rat form, though it was much more difficult. Still, he was relaxed enough so that when he so chose, he could scurry back up to Ronald Weasley's bedroom with the his family none the wiser. After all, even though it was possible to "see" a Disillusioned object or person, it was

difficult, and *certainly* not something one could do by accident. The Weasleys were not peering around searching for small air disturbances.

*He really had chosen well when he found the Weasleys. After Bellatrix and Lucius had abandoned him when word of their Master's fall came down, he had a few goals. He needed to get out of the country. Unfortunately, Black had hunted him down like a trained bloodhound, and he'd been forced to blow up the street and fake his own death. He slightly regretted killing the Muggles; they weren't even aware of magic's existence and Peter, coming from a family that freely married with Muggles and Muggleborns, did not hate them as the Dark Lord did.*

*In the sewers, he had to determine where he would go next. He knew that he needed to stay in touch, but the fact that he'd been unable to read the Daily Prophet or make a Floo Call meant that he'd have to make sacrifices. He had found a redheaded man near the Ministry Building. The man was obviously a wizard. Pettigrew had followed the man to the Leaky Cauldron, where he got a drink after work. He'd managed to hop into the fireplace with him as he returned home.*

*Sneaking out of the fireplace, he'd wandered around, invisible, trying to figure out if this was indeed a family where he could keep in touch with the events of the wizarding world. That the man he had followed was a Ministry employee had made his choice that much easier. Still, his choice had been made when his Disillusionment Charm had faded and he'd been picked up by the tail by a curious young redhead. That child, he later would learn, was named Percy. The boy had argued vehemently to be allowed to keep the rat, and after his father examined him, (nearly giving him a heart attack from fear of detection,) his family had agreed. The family, he had learned, was the Weasleys, a name he knew from the Order. A perfect fit indeed.*

*He'd winced when the boy had given him his name the next day: Scabbers.*

Peter renewed the Disillusionment Charm, feeling the magic beginning to ebb with the brightening sky. He had always loved to watch the sunrise. He didn't know why, but the fiery glow in the sky

had always made him feel better. After his father had died, each day he'd awoken before dawn to watch the sunrise. *James and Sirius dismissed me, thinking I was barmy. Even Lupin looked at me strangely. They acted all high and mighty, and I'm embarrassed to admit that I played along. I was stupid, foolish. I found true power in the Dark Lord.*

His sensitive ears picked up the sound of Mr. Weasley feeding the chickens that lived in the garden. It was time to go.

He transformed silently back into a rat and scurried towards the closing door. He just made it. He was scampering up the stairs when he had to dive to the side to avoid the feet of his former 'master,' Percy Weasley. Peter paused for a moment, as Arthur had pulled out the Daily Prophet. The man had a tendency to loudly announce important headlines. He unfolded the paper, taking a sip of his morning tea, and greeting his third son. He frowned. "Percy, look at this," Arthur said, looking pale.

The redhead with horn-rimmed glasses walked over to his father. He gasped, scratching his head in confusion. "Sirius Black?" he asked his father. Peter felt his blood freeze. *No, no, it couldn't be...* He listened carefully, almost begging the heavens that he wouldn't hear what he feared.

"No one had ever escaped from Azkaban," Arthur said grimly. "No one."

"Black was one of You-Know-Who's followers, right?" Percy asked excitedly. "A spy, a traitor?" Peter would have laughed at the thought. He still thought it rather astounding that people had believed Sirius capable of turning on his friends. He despised his Dark roots, everyone knew that. How they believed he was capable of kneeling at the Dark Lord's feet was beyond him.

Arthur nodded. Peter remained frozen on the stairs. "Yes, he betrayed the Potters, if you remember..." the man wiped his brow, frowning. "Not much information about how he managed it, though. Just that he escaped."

"Did you and Mum know him in the War?" Percy asked. "You did fight with the Potters, didn't you?"

Arthur's face darkened. Peter already knew the answer. He didn't know Arthur Weasley well, but he knew that he'd been in the Order. Sirius had been as well, so it was only reasonable to assume they had crossed paths at one point or another. "Yes, I did...well, to a extent. We were...rather busy with you and the twins, and Molly was pregnant with Ron and then Ginny." He paused, taking a sip of his tea. "We didn't do much in actual combat."

Percy nodded. "So what does this mean? Will they be calling people off their normal duties until he's apprehended?"

"Undoubtedly," Arthur replied. "I'd be surprised if I wasn't given an assignment related to the search. Or at least work transferred from another department." He sighed. "I doubt it will be worth much, though," he said grimly.

Percy frowned. Peter was thinking about leaving right now, but he stayed to listen to his former 'master's' question. "Why Dad?"

"Because it will be the Azkaban Guards who get him, no doubt in my mind," he said. "Those Dementors are the best there is."

*Dementors.* Peter *hated* Dementors. He was absolutely useless at casting a Patronus.

Unable to process any more, Peter scurried back up the stairs, dodging around the steps of Molly Weasley as she headed down to make breakfast. He silently crept back into Ron Weasley's bedroom. The occupant was still snoring loudly, sprawled on the bed wearing his bright orange Canons pajamas. Peter climbed up the bed, jumped to the table beside it, and hurried back into the cage. He used his claws to pull the door closed, then settled down, appearing to sleep.

There was no chance of that. Peter's twelve peaceful years as a family pet might soon be coming to an end.

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In the excitement surrounding Sirius Black's escape from 'inescapable' Azkaban Prison, Harry had somehow forgotten to tell Daphne about the other piece of extraordinarily important news from that day. Daphne, as was to be expected, had been rather skeptical.

Now, as he lay half-awake on the morning of September 1st, Ginny's letter still lying on his nightstand, he recalled that conversation, and the more interesting one that followed it.

*Daphne probably hadn't been still for more than two seconds since they'd arrived back at Dressler Manor. Despite Harry's vow that he would not go after his parents' killer, she was wound up like a spring. She seemed to have endless energy, pacing the polished floors of the Manor constantly. Even an update from Andromeda hadn't calmed her nerves; indeed, it had only made it worse.*

*Harry had decided that it might be best to wait for her to calm down to tell her about what Luna had done. He needed to tell someone, though. He'd settled on writing letters to his friends and to Tonks. He basically summarized what Luna had told him, what she had done, and the fact that he felt more...complete then he had since perhaps the previous year. The more Harry thought about it, the more it seemed likely that he had begun to sustain mental damage from the strain of his unconscious battle with the possessing spirit of Tom Riddle.*

*He also told them about Sirius Black. He did not mention his direct connection to the man; he wasn't sure if even he was comfortable with it yet.*

*And he did not mention his tremendous increase in magical power or the Prophecy. He wanted to tell them, badly, but it simply wasn't an intelligent thing to do. Their minds were completely undefended. The knowledge could be very dangerous in enemy hands. While eventually it might give him strength, his power for the time was a burden, a dangerous behemoth that if unleashed could kill him and anyone around him. It was wild, untamed, the very essence of Dark Magic. It could be put to only one use, and that was destruction. Even the simplest Lighting Charm would be capable of causing permanent blindness.*

*Tonks already knew, of course, but she had promised not to share her knowledge with anyone, not even her mother. The other piece of data, his vague knowledge of the Prophecy, was dangerous for painfully obvious reasons. If a follower of Voldemort got hold of it, Harry's life would be in great danger. He was still merely a thirteen-year old wizard. He stood no chance against the likes of Bellatrix Lestrange...or Sirius Black.*

*Once he had sent the letters off with Hedwig, he had decided to give his guardian the good news. The question, of course, was whether she would believe it. She might be understandably skeptical that the daughter of the editor of the Quibbler had accomplished something that the combined knowledge of Daphne, Dumbledore, and all the resources they had at their disposal had not.*

*Harry found Daphne miraculously still, slumped in a chair in front of the fire. She appeared absolutely exhausted, but appeared to have calmed down somewhat. A book lay discarded on the table beside her, a cup of lukewarm tea in her hands. She was staring into the fire, oblivious of anything going on around her. "Daphne?"*

*His guardian jolted in surprise, nearing spilling the tea on her lap, but recovered. "Yes, Harry?" she asked without looking at him.*

*"Well, I've got...pretty good news..." he said, not completely sure about how to present this so as to make Daphne treat it as credible. He needed to be careful here, or he might make his guardian panic about his condition getting worse. Daphne's rope was fraying, his composure getting worse as the school year drew closer. Harry still could not completely understand her anxiety that she might lose him, not only by his death or abduction, but by his willingly leaving her for someone else, like this Professor Remus Lupin whom he had never actually met. It was irrational, but Daphne's thoughts weren't always what one would consider reasonable.*

*"What, you managed to heal yourself?" Daphne snapped bitterly. She was obviously still quite upset. "I'm sorry, that was uncalled for," she said apologetically. "I'm just..."*

*Harry grinned. "How'd you guess?" he asked brightly.*

*Daphne stiffened. She placed her cup of tea on the table and got to her feet. Then she stared right at him.*

*Harry kept grinning. "Go ahead, try. Take a look and see," he told her. He felt her presence in his mind immediately. She seemed to linger, as if trying to eliminate any remaining doubts.*

*She withdrew and gasped. "I don't believe it... You don't hear any more voices? You aren't getting lost in your thoughts as much?" she asked hopefully.*

*Harry nodded. "You won't believe who helped me either," he said brightly. Simply seeing his guardian cheerful for the first time in weeks was pleasure enough. He deeply cared about her, and deep inside of him lay the fear that she might just give up sometime, give in to despair. Harry didn't want to think about what would happen then.*

*"Who?" Daphne asked. "I don't understand; why didn't you tell me?" she asked, probably with more bitterness than she had intended.*

*"Luna Lovegood," Harry finally said. "She's-*

*"That's impossible," Daphne snapped dismissively. "I know who she is, you've told me about her. She's a schoolchild, a strange one but a schoolgirl nonetheless. How in Merlin's name could she repair damage like that?"*

*Harry shrugged. He really didn't know himself. He would need to delve deeper into the mysteries of Luna. "I don't know," he admitted sheepishly. "She said that my mind was a mess, that all the books were knocked out of the shelves and the floor had holes in it... I guess she reorganized the books and fixed the holes in the floor?"*

*Daphne frowned. "But that's not possible... she'd have to be an extremely powerful Legilimens... or something else..."*

*"She put her hands on my temples," Harry added. "Does that mean anything to you? She also said that she helps her father all the time with his headaches."*

*“Could she have the ability to manipulate another person’s mind?” Daphne mumbled to herself. She shook her head. “I don’t understand, but she did something. The change is tremendous.”*

*“Maybe you should ask Dumbledore?” Harry suggested. “Either way, I think he’ll keep a closer eye on her from now on.” He remembered something. “Well, the thing about Luna is that she always seems to have these insights...it’s strange, to be perfectly honest,” Harry said. “She’s capable of saying something incredibly mature, and yet she goes on about Crumple-Horned Snorkacks, which everyone, (including, I suspect, her,) knows don’t actually exist.”*

*“You think she knows that the things she’s talking about aren’t real?” Daphne asked in surprise. “I know where they come from; her father Novitas is considered to be completely barmy by most.”*

*“Maybe he’s the only one that treats her normally,” Harry proposed. “It’s possible that she might respect what he believes out of loyalty. Everyone else thinks she’s either just strange or unbalanced.”*

*Daphne shook her head. “That isn’t important,” she said dismissively. “I’m just glad that you’re finally healed.” Her voice was very odd, definitely strained, and with a great deal of regret and guilt. “I’m—”*

*“Don’t,” Harry cautioned her. “I know...trust me, I know.”*

*“I’m going to call Dumbledore,” she said. “Have you told your friends yet?”*

*Harry nodded. “I owled them already.” Daphne appeared slightly hurt by the fact that she hadn’t been the first to know. Harry thought that if he’d felt she would listen reasonably, she would have been the first. “I wanted to wait until you’d calmed down a bit.”*

*Daphne nodded. “There’s one other thing,” Harry said, minding Griphook’s warning. “I ran into Blaise Zabini today.”*

*Daphne frowned. “Zabini? I don’t know them personally, but I know that they aren’t affiliated with either the Dark or the Light.”*

*“But they have connections with both,” Harry finished. “I know.”*

*"His mother, of course, is well known. Arabella Zabini is known throughout the wizarding world for her powerful abilities as a Songstress and her beauty. Her music can lift the spirits of defeated warriors or even lower morale in the enemy."* She smiled. *"Sort of like a cross between a Siren and a Phoenix...his father is an Illusionist, one of the best,"* she added.

*"I suspected as much," Harry said. "Blaise appeared and disappeared without a trace."*

*"Teaching his arts to his son," she said softly, mostly to herself. She cleared her throat. "He came with a warning, I imagine. He probably informed you of something that I've known since we returned to England: the purebloods are intrigued by you."*

*Harry nodded. "I suppose it's pretty obvious when you think about it."*

*Daphne looked him in the eyes. "Harry, I won't stop you from finding out more and even contacting some of the purebloods, Light or Dark, they can be equally dangerous. But I want to know who, how and why, simply because I know more about most of them than you do. You will need some of them on your side, eventually. One thing that I always disagreed with Albus about was including Dark families in the Order of the Phoenix. There were a number of them I felt might be interested in the protection and benefit the Order. Albus was dead-set against it."*

*Harry was intrigued. "I'm surprised that you were an advocate for them," he admitted. "I'd think it would be the other way around."*

*She shook her head. "My family believed in the old ways," she explained. "At a young age, my father taught me about the rituals, the ceremonies, the importance of certain dates. My mother taught me the history of our family and our Allies, which included the Longbottoms, just to name one." She paused, obviously trying to keep her composure. "As a magical heir from birth, my family received numerous offers of marriage. The ability of aura detection is prized."*

*Harry nodded. "So I imagine that you had a different perspective on this than Dumbledore."*

*"Yes," Daphne said. "The Dumbledores are not a very old family. In fact, no one really knows where the line came from. I now know that they were descendants of Godric Gryffindor, but very little else; Albus has never been very forth coming with his family's background. Needless to say, while he knows a great deal about purebloods, simply through his frequent interaction with them, he does not at all care for their pureblood supremacy ideas. He believes that Muggleborns are worth the same as the noblest pureblood. His opinions are not popular."*

*"I certainly share that belief," Harry pointed out.*

*Daphne nodded. "As do I. My parents were not of the same opinion, but they accepted Lily because she proved herself so well, much in the same way that Hermione does: she outperforms her peers." She paused, and performed a Warming Charm on her tea before taking another sip. "The problem is that Dumbledore shows disdain for those who believe differently. The man is brilliant and a great leader, but, to be perfectly honest, when Voldemort came for you, we were losing. Badly." She shuddered for a moment and then took a few deep breaths.*

*"The Order was scattered. We'd lost almost half the original members, and the Aurors had been decimated. Wainwright's Ministry was teetering on collapse; he was under heavy fire from Bartemis Crouch and Cornelius Fudge. Voldemort had command of the Giants, the Trolls, and even a number of the Northern goblins were beginning to lean his way, anticipating victory. The werewolves had already joined his cause, and he had sent envoys to the vampires, though they were much more difficult to persuade."*

*"Why?" Harry asked. He didn't know much about vampires, mostly because few, if any of them, inhabited England. They were found mostly in Eastern Europe.*

*"Because they aren't well organized. Yes, they do have clans and clan leaders. But most vampires are solitary, and care little for large-scale events. They feed off animals, mostly," she said. "Yes, they do attack Muggles, but not as often as people believe. Vampires are powerful, but they have a number of key weaknesses, such as*

*sunlight and fire, that make it to their benefit not to draw too much attention from the wizarding governments of Europe.”*

*Harry nodded. “So they didn’t see how they could possibly benefit from joining Voldemort, because if they began attacking en masse, they’d put themselves in serious danger.”*

*“Exactly,” Daphne said. “Anyway, back to the purebloods and Dumbledore. He refused to admit anyone to the Order that would not regard the Muggleborn and Half-blood members as equals. As you can imagine, most refused. Some even cast their lots in with Voldemort.”*

*“That doesn’t make any sense,” Harry protested. “How can he possibly turn away help in the face of defeat?”*

*“He’s a man of conviction,” Daphne explained. “A lot of people never understood why Dumbledore never ran for Minister of Magic; some think it’s because he was too modest. I think it’s because he would have made a terrible politician. Politicians can only stand up for what they believe in so much before they have to make compromises for the sake of progress. Dumbledore wasn’t willing to work with the purebloods. It’s as simple as that.”*

*She sighed, getting up and replacing her book on the small bookcase she had taken it from. “I hate to do this, Harry, but both of us know that you are going to be extremely important in the coming war. We both understand that it is only a matter of time before Voldemort returns. You may be the leader for this war that Dumbledore was in the last.”*

*Harry was speechless. This was the first time that Daphne had really spoken to him about this. He knew it as well as she did, but somehow, not talking about it had made it seem as if the burden didn’t exist. It did now, and Harry knew that he had to accept that.*

*“And you cannot repeat this mistake,” she said firmly, turning to face him. “As much as I hate to say it, the fact that the Dark purebloods are showing interest in you is a very positive thing. You might be able to learn to deal with some of the tamer ones before taking on the more conservative families.”*

*Harry just stared, open-mouthed. The mountain in front of him seemed insurmountable. I'm just a kid, he thought. I'm thirteen bloody years old. And I have to start preparing to be a leader?*

*"I'll help you, Harry," Daphne said, likely reading his thoughts. "You won't be in this alone. You should try to bring your friends into this slowly. If you plan to keep them beside you, they need to be better prepared."*

*"I know," Harry said thickly. He stared into the fire, and could only hope that it wasn't the rest of his childhood innocence going up in flames. He wasn't ready to be man yet. He had barely begun to live...*

"...Master Harry Potter?" a high-pitched voice questioned, breaking him out of his reverie. Harry looked down to see the large, bulbous green eyes of Dobby the House-Elf alarmingly close.

Harry jerked away. "Merlin, Dobby would you *please* not do that? I don't like it when I wake up with you so close to me!"

Harry's outburst had clearly frightened the poor creature. He had fallen to his knees and was begging forgiveness. He'd settled upon this method after Daphne had expressly forbidden him to injure himself. It was equally annoying, but at least caused no physical harm to him. Harry sighed, rolling his eyes. Dobby had taken a liking to him, and while it was nice to have a fanatically loyal House-Elf at times, it *wasn't* when that Elf interpreted Daphne's request to 'wake up Harry' as 'Wake him up this instant or you will be punished.' Harry silently cursed the Malfoys for making Dobby like this.

"Dobby, it was just a request," Harry said calmly. "I'm not angry with you, I'm just making a suggestion." Neither of which were actually true. He was a bit angry, because he'd told the Elf not to do it before and he was *ordering* him not to, not suggesting it." Either way, it made the House-Elf cease his self-degradation and begin praising his ability to forgive. *Why exactly did Daphne hire you?* He wondered for the umpteenth time.

"Mistress Daphne Dressler says that Master Harry Potter should awaken and ensure all things are packed for Master Harry Potter's departure to Hogwarts, sir," Dobby explained quickly. "Mistress also

says that Dobby is to be accompanying Master Harry Potter to Hogwarts and work in the kitchens, sir.”

Harry stared at him. He suddenly felt a slight urge to murder his guardian. Earlier in the summer, he might have been alarmed. Now, he knew the thought was perfectly reasonable. *For Merlin's sake, he means well, and it's difficult to hate him, but he drives me and the other house-elves absolutely bonkers.*

“Daphne told you to go to Hogwarts *with* me?” he replied.

Dobby nodded so quickly that Harry feared...no, hoped...that he might suffer from whiplash. “Yes Master Harry Potter sir, Mistress said that Dobby was to report back on any strange happenings at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Mistress also instructed Dobby to not let Master Harry Potter know that he is there.”

“Don’t I already?” Harry questioned. “Or were you not supposed to tell me that?”

Dobby frowned. “Dobby doesn’t know...oh no! Mistress said that *she* would tell Master Harry Potter about Dobby’s being at Hogwarts...BAD DOBBY!” he squealed loudly. Harry swore he heard a laugh from downstairs. His homicidal impulse towards his guardian increased. *She’s doing this to annoy me and bloody well enjoying it!*

“Dobby!” Harry snapped. “Stop!” Dobby stopped speaking. “I doubt Daphne will mind that you spoiled the surprise,” Harry said, just barely resisting adding in a more...*descriptive* adjective in place of ‘surprise.’”

“Oh, Master Harry Potter is the greatest and most kindest wizard ever!” he squealed. More laughter. Harry’s patience snapped.

“DOBBY, SHUT UP!” he bellowed. “You did your duty, now go away!... and don’t punish yourself!” he added. Dobby slunked out of the room.

Harry got up and showered, dressing in a t-shirt and jeans for the trip to King’s Cross. When he came in, Daphne was there, still chuckling.

"You know, you might have been a *bit* too harsh on him," Daphne advised. "Nor did you pack like I asked you to."

Harry gave her a look that clearly said: "Get over it."

She waved her wand and Harry's school things and clothing flew into his trunk. "Hedwig hasn't come back yet, has she?" Harry asked. Daphne shook her head, then left, still chuckling occasionally. Harry was torn. He was happy that his guardian felt good enough to act in such a lighthearted manner, but he was still fuming from Dobby's wake-up call. *And she knows I hate to be woken up by him too.*

They ate breakfast silently. Daphne's good mood had apparently faded with the realization that she was sending Harry away from her with Sirius Black on the loose, most likely after *him*. Harry broke the awkward silence. "I'll do everything I can to stay safe," he assured her.

Daphne sighed. "I know that, Harry. I trust you...I just don't know if it will be enough. Black is powerful, intelligent, and resourceful. He's also impulsive and judgmental, though that won't help you much." She sighed. "He's loyal, but I just...I can't see him joining Voldemort."

"But he did," Harry said.

"I know. I just... I could never have believed that I'd misjudged his character so badly. But that said, he is guilty." She shook her head as if to clear it. "He was your parent's Secret Keeper. Dumbledore performed the Charm himself. I was there."

"Could they have changed?" Harry asked.

Daphne shook her head. "Impossible," she said dismissively. "They would have told *me*. Lily would have told me."

"But what if..." Harry began.

Daphne looked almost angry with him. "Harry, that's enough. The bastard's the reason your parents and a number of other Order members are dead."

Harry nodded. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply..."

"I know," Daphne said, sounding exhausted. Obviously, she had been pondering the same question a great deal. "I know." She checked her watch. "We should leave. Did you contact Hermione and Ginny?"

Harry shook his head. "I got their latest letters yesterday. They'll be there."

Harry didn't have wait long before he was pulled into a typically fierce embrace by his bushy-haired best friend. He hugged Hermione back. When she let go, she looked into his eyes, as if searching for confirmation that he was really healed. "I'm fine," he assured her. He smiled. "Just glad to see you."

"Me too," she replied softly. She frowned. "Have you seen Ginny? It's rather difficult to miss her family...oh, Hi Daphne," she added, noticing Harry's guardian for the first time. She waved back distractedly, and seemed to be searching the platform for someone. Harry shrugged and picked up his trunk.

"I've already loaded mine," Hermione explained as they approached the Hogwarts Express. "My parents had early appointments, so they got me here about an hour ago," she explained. Harry knew that Hermione's parents were both Muggle dentists.

Harry loaded his trunk into the luggage car. In the pocket of his jeans were his shrunken school robes. Once they had gotten his things aboard, they went back in search of Ginny. Harry spotted Ron Weasley chatting amiably with Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan. Neville Longbottom, standing nearby, waved at him. Harry waved back, then approached the redhead. "Weasley, do you know where I might find your sister?" he asked in the politest voice he could muster.

The boy glared at him. "Why should I help *you*?" he spat.

"Because you are a civil human being?" Hermione offered. She grabbed Harry's arm, obviously bent on avoiding a confrontation. "C'mon, let's go look for her elsewhere."

He followed her lead, searching around the platform a bit. Then Harry saw her speaking with his guardian. He rushed over and snuck up behind her playfully. "Looking for me?" he whispered in her ear.

Ginny jumped, turning bright red. Both Hermione and Daphne laughed. Ginny glared at him. "*Don't do that,*" she ground out.

"I couldn't resist," he admitted. "Come on, let's get your stuff loaded."

After they did so, Harry sent Hermione to find them a cabin while he and Ginny went back for goodbyes. Daphne was standing in the shadows again, possibly so that no one else could see the tears in her eyes. Harry gave her a warm embrace, which she returned fervently. "*Stay safe, please Harry,*" she mumbled. Harry took a step back and looked her in the eyes.

"I will," he said. "I'll keep my promise."

"*Thank you,*" Daphne said softly. She bent and kissed him on the forehead, running a hand through his messy hair. Harry felt the familiar warmth of her love and protectiveness. "*If you need me, I will be there for you.*"

"I know."

With one last hug, he bid farewell to his guardian, heading for the sanctuary of his friends. At that moment, Harry knew for the first time that, eventually, he would be able to forgive her.

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A/N: I really, *really* didn't like this chapter. So I got it done as fast as humanly possible. It was kind of a transition piece to get to Hogwarts.

Well, so now you see another departure from canon with Peter's invisibility trick. I'm sorry, but I can't see anyone spending twelve straight years as a rat. Besides, what can he learn in a cage in Ron's room? Suspension of disbelief might be required here. And I have no intention of redeeming him, bythe way. Far from it.

Daphne's in full 'protective mode' with Sirius on the loose. She also knows he's an animagus.

Harry's off to Hogwarts, and we found out some interesting stuff about one of Dumbledore's shortcomings and vampires.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

## Chapter 7: A Question of Blood

"Have you seen Luna?" Harry asked Ginny as they re-boarded the Hogwarts Express. Harry had kept an eye out for the enigmatic Ravenclaw, but hadn't caught a glimpse of her.

Ginny shook her head. "I wanted to thank her also," she admitted sheepishly. "I still think what she did was incredible."

"Daphne seemed to have an idea of what she might be, but she didn't elaborate. Whatever she is, they are extremely rare," Harry explained. They looked through the cabins, searching for the one that Hermione had claimed. Finally, Harry spotted his friend's distinctive hair. Sliding the door open, Harry saw Hermione sitting on one side reading their new Defense textbook. On the other side, apparently asleep, was a pale, exhausted-looking man with graying brown hair and worn robes.

"Who's that?" Ginny asked quietly.

Hermione pointed towards his battered briefcase. "R.J. Lupin," she read clearly. Ginny nodded and sat down beside her.

"I guess he must be the new Defense teacher," Ginny surmised. Harry already knew that, but simply nodded. "Looks like he had a rough night."

*I'm guessing he did, Harry thought. If I remember correctly, last night was a full moon.* Daphne had told him not to let anyone else know about his Lycanthropy, simply for the sake of respecting her old friend's privacy, so he thought it best to play along.

"Any reason you chose this cabin, Hermione?" Harry asked curiously.

Hermione shrugged. "Is anyone in his or her right mind going to start trouble in the same car as a professor?" Ginny asked rhetorically.

Harry smiled in agreement then noticed Ginny seemed anxious to talk about something. "What is it Ginny?" he asked.

The redhead seemed surprised that he had noticed. "I just wanted to know more about Luna," she admitted. "You've got to admit it's

strange for a girl to find out that her childhood friend healed the Boy-Who-Lived when no one else could.”

“Ginny, never call me that again. It’s just ridiculous, and misleading, to say the least.” Harry appreciated the advantages of his fame, but he despised his moniker. It was born of ignorance and placed the responsibility for the fall of Voldemort on his shoulders, when it had in reality been his mother’s sacrifice that had saved the wizarding world. *Someday, I will make my own destiny. Legends based in truth will be told,* he reminded himself.

“Why...oh...” Ginny said, remembering how he had corrected the legend the previous year. “Right, you wouldn’t have lived if not for your Mum...sorry...”

Harry waved it off. Then he noticed something rather odd beneath Hermione’s seat. A pair of annoyed-looking eyes shined brightly from the darkness. “Hermione, did you buy a pet?” he asked curiously.

Ginny giggled, and Hermione jumped. “What? Oh, you mean Crookshanks?” she asked. Reaching underneath her seat, she pulled out the large carrier, with noticeable effort, and whispered something affectionate before letting the animal out. Harry found himself staring into the squashed face of a large ginger cat. It purred loudly as Hermione scratched it behind the ears, but stared suspiciously at Harry. *Looks like a Kneazle,* Harry thought. Kneazles were related to cats, but had sharper senses, lived longer, and tended to be very good at sensing trouble.

“Oh, he’s *adorable*,” Ginny gushed, beckoning the cat into her lap. She began running her fingers through its thick fur as it purred happily. Harry looked skeptical and Ginny scowled at him. “I like cats,” she said by way of explanation.

Harry shrugged and turned to Hermione, who looked thrilled about something.

“Aren’t you excited for Hogsmeade?” she asked. “It’s one of the oldest wizarding villages in Britain. I’m *sure* you know about the Goblin Rebellion that was headquartered there in 1638, Professor Binns said that it was one of the biggest ever...”

“*Hermione*,” Harry interrupted her. She stopped in mid-rant.

“What?”

Harry stared at her. “Do you *honestly* believe that Daphne would give me permission to go outside the Hogwarts wards with *Sirius Black* on the loose?”

Hermione blushed slightly. “Oh, I’m sorry...I should have thought of that...”

“Daphne wouldn’t sign your permission form?” Ginny asked.

Harry shook his head. It hadn’t been a very long argument. Harry clearly understood why it was a bad idea. Black knew the grounds and the village very well, and Harry would be most vulnerable away from the wards and teachers. Black wasn’t stupid; he wouldn’t ambush his target unless he could get him alone.

“Are you worried about Black?” Hermione asked, sounding concerned. “I read up on him, and the man seems *horrible*. He’s a mass murderer.”

Harry just barely restrained himself from wincing. He’d made up his mind that he wouldn’t acknowledge that Black was his Godfather. His past history, on the other hand... “He betrayed my parents,” Harry said darkly. “Do either one of you know what the Fidelus Charm is?”

Ginny shook her head, but Hermione looked up in surprise. “He was their Secret Keeper?” Hermione asked nervously. Harry simply nodded, staring out the window. Ginny looked confused, and Hermione quickly explained how the Charm worked. By the end of the explanation Ginny looked nervous, too..

As she opened her mouth to ask a question, the door to the cabin slid open. Harry tensed, expecting a visit from either Ron Weasley or Draco Malfoy. It was neither. Instead, Blaise Zabini stood in the doorway, wearing a curious smile. “Potter,” he said. He greeted Ginny and Hermione similarly Then nodded his head towards the older man. “That our new Defense Professor?” he asked.

"He is," Harry said. Hermione's puzzled look made him aware that he might have said that with a little *too* much conviction.

"What do you want, Zabini?" he asked pointedly. He was in no mood to play games with his classmate. Truth be told, he was tired. *Damn Dobby and his wakeup calls.* Harry remembered that he wouldn't escape the overeager House-Elf at Hogwarts, and his mood became even worse.

"Well, I wanted to ask if I might sit with you. Somehow I got stuck in a train car with Pansy Parkinson and Tracey Davis." He made a disgusted face and Ginny snorted back a laugh. "Needless to say, I have little to discuss with them. For a Parkinson Magical Heir, Pansy sure comes off as petulant. She and Malfoy are perfect for each other." He smirked. Zabini was one of those Slytherins that could express about twenty different emotions with a smirk.

Harry had to admit that between Zabini's show of concern for his well being this summer and his seemingly innocent motives now, he didn't mind spending some time with the boy. He was like Nott: they both knew a great deal about their classmates. Zabini talked more than Nott though, that was for sure. Theodore seemed perfectly happy to exchange a word or two with Greengrass and spend the rest of the time eavesdropping silently.

"Fine," Harry decided. "If that's alright with you?" he asked Hermione and Ginny. Ginny shrugged, and Hermione made a non-committal gesture. Clearly, neither felt strongly one-way or the other.

Zabini smiled. "Good to hear." He took a seat down on Hermione's side of the cabin. At the pureblood's odd behavior, Harry raised an eyebrow. Hermione noticed and gave him something that might have been a glare. Harry ignored it, knowing that she'd figure out what he'd meant in a moment.

Zabini shrugged. "Our family has never freely married with Muggles or Muggleborns, but we're somewhat less...severe than others are. I certainly think you've proved your worth. Wouldn't you agree, Granger?"

Hermione huffed indignantly. “I shouldn’t even have to. The pureblood prejudices are just ridiculous. Muggleborns are worth the same as purebloods. We aren’t all ignorant fools.”

If there was one thing Harry had learned about his Gryffindor friend, it was that she did not take kindly to prejudices, of any kind. It was a value that had probably been learned, rather than instilled in her by her parents. Harry still remembered Mr. Granger’s rather insensitive and thoughtless remarks about the primitiveness of wizards, specifically, their acceptance of violence as a way of settling disputes. He seemed to look down on wizards, or perhaps he’d simply been a bit uncomfortable, it was difficult to tell. Harry realized he knew next to nothing about Hermione’s mother, and probably should make such assumptions. *For all I know, her mother is dedicated to fighting social injustice...*

“I wasn’t implying that you were. The Zabinis are proud of their blood and their ancestry, but we don’t carry the same disdain of Muggleborns as the Malfoys or the Bullstrodes. We certainly don’t hate them.” Harry did not like the way this conversation was going. Zabini would be a good ally, and forcing him to defend his family’s ideals was not the ideal way to accomplish that.

“Hermione, you have to understand that while it may seem barbaric to you for people to judge others on the basis of blood, that is something that is and has been accepted in the wizarding world for generations. You don’t have to agree with it, but it isn’t fair to attack Blaise for it.”

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest, glaring at the Black boy. Zabini smirked. “Don’t Muggles have all kinds of problems with racism? Wizards aren’t judged based on the color of their skin.”

Hermione’s eyes were blazing. She *had* been inviting that, but just as it wasn’t fair for Blaise to represent all purebloods, Hermione was not a representative of Muggles and Muggleborns everywhere. “Alright, both of you, stop it,” Harry growled.

Hermione still looked irritated. Blaise leaned back lazily, which seemed to further annoy her. “Knock it off Zabini.”

The boy scowled at him but didn't respond. "I trust you thought about my warning, Potter," he said. Both of his friends, who didn't know about his meeting with Zabini, looked up in surprise.

"What warning?" Ginny asked suspiciously.

"You didn't tell them?" Zabini asked with amusement. "Well, Potter is becoming the subject of pureblood Floo Calls everywhere. He should feel quite honored."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hermione asked. Harry felt she was being unusually protective of him. *I suppose that is to be expected...*

"He means that the purebloods find me interesting," Harry explained. "It's only to be expected, considering who I am and what I've done. I'm above average in power and advanced in skill, and that's enough to intrigue them. One thing that you need to understand about purebloods is that they are most interested in power. Not personal power or glory, but in power of others. By allying with powerful wizards and witches, they benefit themselves."

Zabini nodded in approval. "Well said. I simply advised Potter that he had a chance to gain support, and that he needed to avoid showing signs of weakness. Being unconscious for several months qualifies as 'weakness'."

"But that wasn't his fault!" Hermione protested vehemently. "He was badly injured, what do you expect him to do, get right back up from having his mind ripped to shreds?" Her voice was almost hysterical now. Harry sent her a glare to quiet her, she'd already said too much.

"Do you think that *matter* to them?" Harry asked her. "They don't care if I got hit by the Hogwarts Express; they were disappointed that I had managed to nearly get myself killed."

"Why do care so much about the purebloods?" Ginny asked.

Zabini scoffed. "You're a pureblood, why do you think?"

Ginny glared at him. "Weasleys have intermarried often." Turning back to Harry, she said. "Why do you need their approval? You're just thirteen!"

Zabini was staring at him intently, and Harry cursed silently as he realized that he'd been backed into a corner. *Damn Slytherins.* "Because I want to be a leader," Harry offered. "It's expected of me, and it's something that I want to do. I'm in Slytherin for a reason, and it's not because I'm particularly sneaky or cunning." It was something he'd begun to accept about halfway through the previous year, as if he'd anticipated the Prophecy. He'd come to Hogwarts just hoping to be accepted. He still wasn't sure if he'd accomplished that to the extent that he wanted, but his priorities had been set much higher in the past two years.

Hermione frowned, but said nothing. Zabini smirked in a way that clearly said he wasn't satisfied by that answer. Ginny still looked puzzled. "Don't you care about the Muggleborns and half-bloods? They are certainly important as well."

"Of course they are," Harry agreed, "but it's much easier for a Light-affiliated half-blood to gain their approval than the Dark purebloods."

Ginny frowned. "*Dark* purebloods?"

Harry barely resisted an urge to scream. The Weasleys meant well, but when Ginny said they didn't care much for pureblood politics, they weren't kidding. The entire family saw little or no difference between a Dark wizard and Death Eater. "They aren't all followers of Voldemort, Ginny. They practice wilder, more dangerous, but in most cases, powerful types of magic. Other families are unaligned, like the Zabinis. Correct, Blaise?"

The boy nodded. "It amazes me how many people assume that because my mother is a Dark witch, we're chummy with Death Eaters. We left England during the First War *because* of Death Eaters."

"So you *ran away?*" a dreadfully unwelcome voice spat. Harry felt his wrist cock almost unconsciously. The urge to hex Ron Weasley was becoming overwhelming. The always-unwelcome redhead had just appeared outside the compartment door, his arms crossed over his

chest. He was obviously looking for a fight, or at least a chance to harass Harry. *And I don't plan to give him anything of the kind.*

"We were more interested in our survival than anything else, yes," Zabini replied evenly. "Seems like a rather intelligent way to go about things, doesn't it?"

"If you're a slimy Slytherin," Weasley spat. Harry still refused to look at him. He couldn't see Ginny, as he was currently staring out the window, but he was sure she was fuming.

"Ron, do you have anything *useful* to contribute to this conversation?" Ginny asked in a poisonously sweet voice. "Or are you just here to make an arse of yourself in front of a teacher."

"What teach...oh, blimey!" he exclaimed. Harry finally looked up. Ron was accompanied by Seamus and Dean, but surprisingly, Fred and George were with them. The twins did *not* look happy with Harry but he wasn't sure how much he cared, either. They wouldn't dare prank him, not when Ginny had her mother's ear.

"Leave," Harry said coldly.

"Make me, you bloody evil git!" he hissed. "I spent two months in the Hospital Wing because of you, and you *are* going to pay for that!" It was a very Gryffindor-ish comment.

*All guts and no brains. Ron really did give them a bad name.* "I have no interest in giving you further reason to drag my name through the mud," Harry replied. "Though I find it ironic that one with Godric's legendary bravery resorts to rumors and gossip to fight his battles."

"Maybe you ought to brew a *potion* to fix your brain," Ginny growled.

Ron paled. "Come on, let's go," he said hurriedly, walking away quickly.

Fred and George had already gone, apparently uninterested in what was going on. Dean and Seamus followed their friend. Zabini eyed him with a calculating expression. He whistled. "Got some dirt on Weasley, do you?"

Harry simply nodded. It was obvious that Ron's blunder with the Polyjuice Potion might benefit him more than he originally thought. While his Head of House wouldn't be happy that he'd withheld important information, he'd certainly not waste an opportunity to decrease the school population of Weasleys. The fact that Ron made his dislike of Snape obvious to anyone with the ability to hear nearly every class would probably contribute to that as well. *And you've still got leverage on the Head Girl*, he reminded himself. Ginny had written that Percy wouldn't shut up about the fact that the two of them had been awarded the titles, and the special rooms that came with them.

Percy Weasley was an interesting young man. Unlike most of the Weasleys, he showed genuine ambition and desire to reach a high position of leadership. He was a stickler for the rules and a model student. While he clashed often with his brothers, Harry suspected that Percy was likely to surpass the rest of his family. Percy's opinion of Harry was not particularly favorable.

*After Bill, I think Ginny has the best chance of success*, Harry thought. *The twins may be magical geniuses and quite powerful, but I doubt they'll ever devote themselves to anything the average wizard would consider worthwhile...though they might be damn good at designing weaponry. It's basically the same thing as what they are doing, only more dangerous.*

"So, Weasley," Zabini said oft-handedly. "Planning to try out for the Quidditch team?"

Ginny glanced up in surprise, but narrowed her eyes. "What do you have to say about it?" she asked snappishly. It was readily apparent that Harry was getting along much better with Zabini than either of his best friends. Hermione was still thinking about his prejudices, and Ginny didn't seem that impressed either. Harry was finding Zabini to be interesting company. He'd never gotten along poorly with him, but never talked much with his classmate either.

"I'll take that as a yes," he replied. "Chaser, I'm guessing?"

"Flint didn't fail again, then?" Harry asked.

Zabini shrugged. "I wouldn't bet on it, but I don't think he's allowed to attend Hogwarts for another year...sounds like you're relieved about that."

Harry nodded. "I'm assuming Pucey will be Captain this year. Nothing can be worse than Flint. I *still* shiver at the memory of some of those practices." Flint had gained a reputation of being either completely ignorant of weather or so focused on his only area of competence that he simply didn't care when the team was practicing in the freezing rain with howling winds.

Hermione was now engrossed in her book, while Ginny was alternating staring out the window and paying attention to the conversation. "Think he'll be any good?" Zabini asked, jerking a thumb in the direction of Lupin.

"Can he *be* worse than Lockhart?" Harry asked.

"Probably not," Hermione said, still not looking up.

Zabini grinned evilly. "Pretty strong words for a girl who *fancied* him last year."

Hermione's head shot up like a whip. "*What?*"

He just smirked at her, and Hermione's cheeks turned pink with embarrassment. "You know what I'm talking about. You weren't quite as bad as a few of the Slytherin girls, but I could see the expression on your face. Potter here got you straightened up though."

"*And thank Merlin for that,*" Harry mumbled under his breath. Ginny snorted.

"You know, Potter, you really ought to spend more time with the rest of the school. People kind of wonder why you spend so much time with these two," Zabini said, completely changing the subject. By design or not, it was very disconcerting.

"Why does he need to do *that?*" Hermione snapped. "Are you implying that we are not good enough friends?"

"Hermione, what are you talking about?" Ginny asked. "I really think you are being a bit harsh on him."

Hermione just glared. Clearly, getting Hermione Granger and Blaise Zabini to like each other wasn't going to be that easy. Harry decided to tackle Zabini's question, which was certainly a legitimate concern. While it was doubtful that he would be able to do anything to earn true respect from adult wizards, pureblood or otherwise at the age of thirteen, the same was certainly not true of wizarding children. And Harry had to admit that, though it wasn't really his fault, he had done very little to socialize outside his two best friends.

"I'll keep that in mind, Blaise," Harry said, trying out the boy's given name for the first time. Blaise raised an eyebrow slightly, but otherwise didn't react. He was clearly practiced at hiding his true emotions. It was something that Harry knew he had to work on.

"Oh, one other thing," he said, leaning towards Harry. "Don't bite off more than you can chew. To be perfectly honest, Potter, your fame only goes so far. Most adult wizards aren't going to regard you as anything close to equal, pureblood or not. You haven't demonstrated anything truly exceptional."

Harry had to admit that the boy was correct, and began to reassess a few of his earlier plans. Even Daphne didn't seem to be anticipating advising him *this year*.

Abruptly, Harry realized just how important his vast reserves of magical power really were. Beyond simply being able to wield tremendous power, if Daphne had been accurate in her earlier assessment, he might someday rival Dumbledore or Voldemort in magical prowess. And *that* was the central issue. While at this point his power was a weakness because of his inability to control it, the sooner he could wield it, the better. *It's ironic. Riddle nearly got me and number of others killed, yet the power he left behind might make it possible for me to defeat his future self...not that I would repeat the experience.*

Harry was certain of that.

"Lost in your thoughts, Harry?" Blaise asked curiously. Harry resisted the urge to jump and simply cocked his head in the boy's direction. Blaise's gaze was not accusatory, nor particularly suspicious. It was a look of genuine curiosity. Fortunately, Harry knew that the chances that Blaise wasn't still testing him were rather low. He'd been vaguely aware of the boy's motives from the beginning. It was clear he wasn't here because he needed companionship. *Though that doesn't mean the two of us cannot be close friends. There's something about him that I like a great deal. We can certainly be allies.*

No, Harry believed that Blaise had approached him for the same reason that the purebloods cared about him: He was the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry normally disliked those who judged him or assessed his worth based upon his fame. But Blaise was no 'groupie.' Blaise was attempting to gather an estimation of his capabilities, to understand his beliefs and ideas about his future in the wizarding world. Harry could not honestly say he knew what Blaise thought about him right now. *I would like to think I've either lived up to or even surpassed his expectations. But based on the fact that twice he's criticized me, once on my lack of contact with the student body, once accusing me of shooting too high.*

Harry knew that in Blaise Zabini, he had a useful gauge as to how the rest of the school viewed him. It lay somewhere in between Hermione and Ginny's adoration and Ron's hatred. His quest was to find out exactly where in the middle the others lay. For it was their opinions that mattered most. *My destiny can be viewed as blessing or a curse. Perhaps it terminates what was left of my childhood, but it is also a motivation to pursue greater and higher things.*

Abruptly, Blaise rose to his feet. "I've got a few other things to check on," he announced. "Nice speaking with you, Potter."

Harry was a bit surprised that the boy was leaving, but it was his choice to make. He nodded politely. Blaise left.

Hermione instantly pounced on him. "Spill it. What in God's name have you been up to?" she demanded angrily. Clearly, she had been just been being considerate when she'd ceased her protests. "Why on earth do you care about Dark wizards? And mind, I'm not saying

they are evil gits and you are insane to even think about meeting them, but I have to ask: What are you trying to accomplish?"

From the look in Ginny's eyes, the younger redhead was thinking along the same lines.

Harry felt like he was being x-rayed. "I...well, I'm trying to start building alliances."

"That's all well and good, Harry, but you're *thirteen*," Ginny reminded him, looking at him suspiciously. "You never showed this much initiative before."

"And that was a mistake!" Harry burst out, frustrated. This entire thing could be explained away by telling them what he knew of the Prophecy, but that obviously was not possible. It would place them and the information itself in far too much danger.

Hermione shook her head in confusion. "Why now?"

Harry took a deep breath. He was in a tough spot. He needed to somehow alleviate the concerns of his two best friends without revealing the forbidden knowledge. *You were Sorted into Slytherin for a reason, Potter*, he reminded himself. *You can do this. They'll understand later.*

Harry had no doubt of that. Hermione and Ginny might be upset that he had deceived them, but both would understand why. After the previous year, both understood what was at stake. "Last year was a wakeup call of sorts," he explained, "it's not that you two aren't observant enough, but one of the reasons that Tom was able to possess me the way he did was because he played upon my doubts and my isolation. Don't get me wrong, you two are the best friends a boy could ask for." Hermione's cheeks were a bit pink, and Ginny ducked her head. "I mean it. But I'm vulnerable if I stay that way. I need to start making inroads with the rest of the wizarding world, no matter who it is."

Hermione obviously wasn't satisfied. "Why?"

Harry blew out a deep breath. “Because like it or not, the wizarding world expects a lot from me. They expect their Boy-Who-Lived to be powerful and strong. They don’t understand why I survived, so they assume there’s something special about me. They think me destined for greatness. And as nice as it would be to tell them to sod off, I can’t do that. Maybe I can’t live up to their superhuman dreams, but I can be a strong leader, and I *want* to be. But I’ve gotten off to a terrible start.”

Ginny looked thoughtful. “Do you really feel you owe the wizarding world something? Wouldn’t it be the other way around?”

Harry shrugged. This explanation, which was partially based in truth, seemed to be working well enough. “To an extent. It isn’t just about them, though. It’s something *I* want...I’d love it if you two could stand with me. I’m not trying to run for Minister, I’m just trying to be more of a public figure with the student body. The adult-wizards won’t listen to me if their children view me as some sort of recluse.”

“That makes sense,” Hermione admitted. “I’ve certainly heard people say they wonder why you only spend time with the two of us.” She looked him straight in the eyes, and Harry had to fight back a flinch. “I’ll help you with this if this is what you really want.”

“All I really need is simply to be more social, to be around and get to know some of the other students. I don’t need either of you to do anything; it’s probably better if it doesn’t look deliberate. Just understand that I won’t spend all of my time with you. It might be a good idea for the two of you to get to know other people as well.”

Ginny looked slightly guilty. “I really ignored Anne and Melissa most of last year after they helped me get settled in,” she admitted.

Hermione winced. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “Most of the school isn’t that fond of me...”

“Then work to change that,” Harry urged her, pleased with the way he’d managed to divert her attention yet have a constructive conversation. “Show them you aren’t dependent on me. You are a strong and intelligent witch, Hermione. Let them know that.”

"Though I'd suggest not being so vocal in class," Ginny said earnestly. "We all know how bright you are, but people think you are trying to show off. What do Muggles call it?"

"Hog the spotlight," Hermione supplied. She blushed slightly. "I suppose I do have a few things to work on."

"Well, then it's settled," Ginny said, smiling. "We'll all try to break out of our little hermitage and get to know some people."

As the conversation turned to much lighter topics, Harry strangely began to feel even more anxious. He felt colder all of a sudden, as if someone had cast a Cooling Charm. He was also sweating a bit. He glanced nervously out the window, searching the darkness for potential threats. He saw nothing, just the rain splattering off the windows of the train.

Abruptly, the train began to slow, and Harry felt his pulse racing. *Something is wrong.* Hermione and Ginny began looking around in confusion. Harry stared out the window as the train slowed to a dead halt. He could hear commotion from both sides as confused students tried to figure out what was going on. He thought he heard Percy yelling for them to get back inside their compartments.

"What—" Ginny began as the lights flickered, then went out. Harry realized that the temperature in the cabin had dropped dramatically. Frost was beginning to spread across the compartment window, and Harry thought he saw something moving outside. He felt a bead of sweat on his forehead. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

Harry shushed his friend, and he and Hermione continued to peer out the cabin window. They still were examining the blackness when the door to the cabin clicked open. Harry spun, his wand already in his hand. "*Lumos,*" he breathed.

The creature in the doorway retreated momentarily, but the light faded out of its own accord, the terrifying shadow devouring the magic with a hungry desperation, like a starved beast. Still, Harry had gotten a close enough look at it to know *exactly* what it was. His blood ran cold. The creature was suspended about three centimeters off the ground, its torn and shredded robes flowing as if in a strong

breeze. Under the hood was a face hidden in shadow, a gaping maw where its mouth should have been.

Memories began to run past him. Horrific memories. The creature turned towards him. He unconsciously fought the pull on his mind with his unrefined Occlumency, but the creature pushed past the barriers, drawing his worst memories forward, savoring the moments of fear, anguish, and pain.

*Voldemort's lips curled into an evil smile, his eyes sparkling with malice. "Let us test that resolve. He raised his wand in the direction of the girl floated lifelessly in the air, looking like a puppet hanging on a string. Her eyes were shut, and a trickle of blood slid down to the floor from a bloody bump on the back of her head. Harry was frozen in fear, the Philosopher's Stone in his robe pocket digging into his side. "Abrumpo!" the two-faced man hissed*

*The curse hit Hermione square. It penetrated deeply, and her stomach exploded in a shower of crimson as Voldemort laughed manically...*

*...Hermione frantically scrambled around for her wand as Harry advanced towards her down the corridor, twirling his wand absently in his fingertips. Hermione tried to pull herself to her feet, and stood up shakily. She quavered in his gaze, her mouth moving but no sound coming out. Her brown eyes were wide with terror.*

*"Dear, dear...I'm afraid that Harry will miss you deeply...but I'm saddened to say that you know too much. Knowledge can be deadly, you see?" he whispered maliciously, calling to mind the perfect curse to end the insolent Mudblood's life.*

*Hermione raised her wand, but it was clear she was completely defenseless. He grinned widely, leveling his wand at her forehead.*

*"Mentis Mortis!" he cried. A jet of yellowish light exploded from the end of his wand. It connected with the girl's forehead, and for an instant, her head was surrounded by an eerie halo of gold. Then it vanished, and she slumped to the ground. Harry cackled with glee...*

*...Harry grabbed Ginny into a brutal embrace, forcing her hands behind her back. The terrified redhead struggled, then seemed incapacitated by terror. Her wide, frightened brown eyes gazed in horror at him as he forced her head upwards, summoning his wand from Snape and aiming his recaptured prize at the alabaster column of his hostage's throat...*

*...Daphne's eyes lit with malice, her fury buckling her mental shields for an instant before they shattered. Her hair flew behind her in the wind created by the outpouring of magic. Her skin was drawn tightly to her face, her mouth contorted in a vindictive sneer. Harry took a step back, but it was too late.*

*"CRUCIO!" she shrieked. Harry felt his body catch fire, his blood boiling in his veins. Thousands of burning knives stabbed into his flesh, ripping his guts open. He writhed in agony, a scream of agony torn from his throat. He scratched and clawed at the ground, staring through the haze of pain at his guardian in shock and betrayal...*

Harry barely heard the whimpers of his friends as they relived the horrors of their lives. Hermione begged Harry for forgiveness as she recalled mistakenly giving him the poison. She weakly cried for help as she saw his body slammed into the wall by the troll's club, his bones snapping with sickening cracks. Ginny whimpered as Tom assaulted her mind, crushing her resistance and forcing her into unconsciousness...

Harry felt the darkness enveloping his vision. He saw a flash of light, and a man yell something he couldn't understand. He felt himself falling back, both towards the ground and in his mind, and heard a woman's scream.

Then everything went black...

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Remus Lupin had been awake for about half of the conversation between James's son and the two girls that were apparently his best friends. He'd been surprised by the tone and alarmed by the content. *What has Daphne been telling him? Why in Merlin's name does he feel the need to have anything to do with Dark purebloods?*

He'd still been pondering the answers to those questions when he'd felt the cabin temperature plummet. He'd gone dormant, what little strength he had remaining from his transformation drained by the presence of the Dementor. When he'd heard the stifled scream from the small girl on the seat near him, he'd exploded into action. He stood tall before the Dementor, his inner wolf snarling in rage as it attempted to penetrate his mind. He raised his battered oak and dragon heart-string wand, summoned memories of Harry's father and cast the only charm he knew of that affected a Dementor.

"None of us is hiding Sirius Black under our cloaks! Leave!" he ordered the creature.

It struggled momentarily against Remus Lupin's Patronus, waves of pure light washing over it, causing it pain. Finally, with a ghastly shriek of frustration, it fled. All over the train, the Dementors finished their search, and Lupin watched as the lights flickered and then re-illuminated the train. With a groan of stressed metal, the old train began to move once more, picking up speed.

Remus knew that it was his duty to check on the engineer and calm the students, but he felt he first needed to aid the three unconscious children in his cabin. Harry lay sprawled on the floor where he had fallen, his wand still gripped tightly in his hand. A small redhead was slumped against her seat a few feet away from him, her face pale. Across the compartment, a girl with bushy brown hair was groaning as she came to. She blinked in confusion, then stared with alarm as Remus.

"Calm down," he urged her. "That was a Dementor, it's gone now, and it can't hurt you."

"Professor Lupin?" she asked softly, her eyes half-closed as she shifted into a sitting position. She answered Remus's questioning look by pointing at his briefcase, where his initials were clearly visible. He nodded. The girl looked nervous as she shifted her gaze from James's son to her redheaded friend. "Will Harry and Ginny be alright?" she asked.

Remus nodded. The redhead was indeed Bill's sister, Ginny. He pulled his briefcase down and opened it, searching for something.

Hermione looked at him curiously, but he found what he was looking for and pulled out the bar of chocolate. He broke off a piece and offered to Hermione. "Chocolate; it will get your blood flowing and warm you up. Trust me."

She accepted and chewed cautiously. Remus fought back a frown. Dementors were foul creatures, hated by almost every living wizard. Children were normally quite shaken after their first encounter with one. But the fact that all three students had passed out told him something unsettling. *All three have been through truly harrowing experiences. Life or death situations that none of them should have been a part of.*

Remus took a small bite of the chocolate. Hermione's head shot up from the noise as he broke off a piece, and he smiled reassuringly at her. She blushed slightly and seemed to be berating herself. Obviously, she was still on edge.

Ginny was stirring now. Remus broke off another piece and fed it to her as soon as she was lucid. Her color improved almost immediately. Her eyes immediately went to Harry. A thought crossed Remus's mind that with green eyes, she might have been mistaken for a young Lily Evans. Of course, he thought in amusement, *Lily would hardly be showing this much concern for James at this age.*

Remus walked over and gently picked up Harry, laying him flat on the seats. Hermione got up to help him. When he finally awoke, Remus was amazed by the likeness to his father, at least until he opened Lily's eyes. He'd seen Harry as a baby, but he'd never imagined that from his body type, to his glasses, to his hair, to his facial structure, the two would be identical. "Harry," he said quietly, "are you alright?"

The boy blinked in confusion. Then he closed his eyes and reopened them, seeming to understand where he was. "Remus?" he asked in confusion. Lupin nodded. Harry began to push himself into a sitting position as Remus went back to get a piece of chocolate. As he did, he noticed Hermione staring at her friend in confusion.

"How did you know..."

"Harry, are you alright?" Ginny cut her off, seeming to come to her senses for the first time. She hurried over and sat down next to him. Hermione frowned at being interrupted, but waited for Harry's answer. The boy blinked again.

"I'm fine...just a little rattled." Remus offered him the chocolate and Harry took it without seeming to think about it much. "That was a Dementor, right?" he asked Remus.

"Yes...I'm surprised you knew that," he admitted.

Harry shrugged, straightening up in his seat. "I read a lot."

Hermione glanced at her watch. "We'll be there soon; we should change."

Harry nodded. "I've got my robes with me; Daphne shrunk them. You two go get yours."

"And I'll check on the rest of the students," Remus said, getting up to leave. "I'll talk to you later Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded, looking a bit confused that Remus had chosen to be more formal at *this* moment. The man had to admit that Harry's confusion was understandable. Still, Remus knew that in his role of Hogwarts professor, he couldn't afford to have a visible special relationship with the Boy-Who-Lived. Any excuse would be enough to have him sacked. *Dumbledore is taking a risk for me, and I won't waste my opportunity.*

Remus took one last look at the three children, and then left. He saw many students peeking out of the compartments. A harassed-looking redhead was telling one of them off. He stopped when he saw Remus.

"I'm the new Defense professor. What's going on here?"

"Merlin, am I glad to see you. I'm a Prefect, Percy Weasley," he said gratefully.

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Standing atop a rocky precipice above a deep gorge, Padfoot stared at the viaduct where the train had groaned to a halt. He saw the black shapes of several Dementors swooping down. It was his fault; he'd been in human form, cleaning off the accumulated dirt and grime with the rainwater, when he'd felt the familiar presence. He'd transformed immediately.

Unable to detect his less complex emotions, the Dementors instead made for the abundance of young, happy souls on board the train. Sirius knew that they would be guarding Hogwarts as well. He didn't think it would be that difficult to evade them, using the passages he knew as a Marauder and the Forbidden Forest. Bane owed him a favor, and would tolerate his presence. Even if he didn't believe his innocence, he wouldn't care. Sirius could use the Forest and the Shrieking Shack at his leisure. He'd just have to be cautious and not take risks. He would get Harry alone, and either convince him to come or kidnap him, (though he wanted to avoid the latter.) Then he'd find one of the Black homes and settle down. Harry would learn to accept him, and he'd use the Black wealth to make him happy and keep them both fed and watered. He'd figure out where to go next after that.

*I'm coming Harry. And no one is going to stop me.*

Harry was eternally grateful that Blaise had not seen him pass out from the presence of the Dementor. While it was certainly understandable considering his youth and horrifying past experiences, it would have been both embarrassing and a further example of 'weakness' that he had been warned about.

The students were still chattering in hushed voices as they got off the train and boarded the carriages. Harry saw that most of the First Years looked absolutely terrified, probably from a combination of anxiety and the presence of the Dementors. He smiled at a short, scared-looking boy, who brightened a bit at the sight of him. He whispered something to the girl next to him, but she didn't react as her eyes locked on the towering form of Hagrid. Harry gave the half-giant a wave and the man waved back excitedly. He looked around for Professor Lupin, but the man was nowhere to be seen.

He found his friends in the crowd, and the three of them made their way to the parked carriages. Harry pondered the scream that he had heard before he passed out.

Then it hit him like a Bludgeoning Curse.

His nightmares...

His mother.

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A/N: Real life has caught up with my Beta, so even though I've actually written chapter 8, it might take a little while. Please don't blame him, though. He's put his life aside to help a teenager like me out of the goodness of his heart.

Anyway, somehow this chapter didn't really come out the way I had hoped. It felt kind of...forced, I guess. I'm not sure what you'll think of it. I loved the next chapter, though. A little more on the enigma that is Luna Lovegood, among other things.

I will be including a bit more Draco Malfoy in this thing at somepoint. The last time he raised his perfectly-groomed head might have been the Dueling Club. Sirius is still en route to Hogwarts, as you can see. I actually used a clip from the PoA video game because I liked it so much. It helps explain why the Dementors were there in the first place.

Oh, and Harry still has issues with Dementors. He's been through hell, so it's not that surprising. I've got a slightly different Patronus planned. I'm not betting Harry will have his father's animagus considering what he thinks of James.

I'm neglecting Ginny. It's rather irritating, because I keep thinking that Hermione would be a better fit (mostly because she's my favorite character)...but everytime I think that, I realize for the umpteenth time that I just don't think I can make that work. I'd also have to pull it off SIYE, but it's more my inability to make that ship work that is the problem. And for god's sake, don't write a bunch of reviews asking for it. Point is, I'm going to need to develop the Littlest Weasley's character a great deal and keep her away from Mary Sue

territory. I need a strong, yet flawed, young woman, not a sluggish goddess or wide-eyed little girl (ew....)...

We'll see how that goes. Luna is out of the question, as is Tonks. Daphne Greengrass and Harry would be the most depressing couple I can imagine. One can watch a person get run over and not even blink, the other was tortured and had his mind shredded by his guardian. No thanks.

Ah, yes, Blaise. Interesting dynamic between him and Hermione. Kind of like Ron but far more intelligent. That said, I'm not sure who Hermione's going to end up with, so again, *please* don't ask. To those who suggested Nott as Harry's friend, there's a number of reasons that won't work. Remember how little you actually know about him. Before someone accuses me of being unoriginal in choosing him, wait to see how his personality develops please.

Now that I've made a number of demands of my reviews, I'll end with my normal pathetic begging.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

## Chapter 8: Autophobia

The realization that Harry had heard his mother's dying moments didn't hit him quite as hard as he might have thought it would. It was, after all, not the first time he had heard them. For years as a young child, he'd suffered through nightmares of the night that Voldemort had murdered his parents. Still, there was something deep within Harry, some embedded instinctual horror at hearing his mother screams before she was murdered. Harry shivered, and it wasn't from the cold.

Ginny and Hermione didn't appear completely recovered from the Dementor either. Both were staring straight ahead, likely replaying their frightful memories in their minds. He placed a hand on Ginny's shoulder, but she didn't jump, as he had expected. Finally, she turned her head to look at him. "Are you alright?" he asked her quietly. She nodded energetically.

"Just a bit shaken up...I hadn't really *thought* about last year that much in a while. It was kind of a shock," she admitted. "I'm just glad that it's over and you're healed." She smiled weakly at him. He smiled back.

Ginny leaned against him for a moment, then shifted uncomfortably, moving away. There was a slight blush on her cheeks, and Harry's were a bit warm as well. Both continued to move slightly farther apart from each other. Harry glanced up, but saw that Hermione hadn't noticed anything. Harry let it drop from his mind and closed his eyes, trying to fight back the surging tide of memories.

The carriages made the uphill climb to one of the entrances of the castle. They stopped, and the students began to debark, still chattering excitedly. Hermione was looking into the night, searching for something.

"Are the Dementors here to watch for Sirius Black?" she asked abruptly. She was still trembling.

"I think so," Harry said. "Why else would Dumbledore permit them to be here?"

Ginny shivered. "Aren't they usually accompanied by Aurors?" she asked. "To keep them from losing control and attacking people?"

Harry frowned. She was right; normally, Aurors who had mastery of the Patronus Charm acted as controllers for the Dementors. While they certainly didn't care for the prisoners in Azkaban, they also didn't want them to lose control and Kiss every last one of them. That fate was reserved for very few. Certainly at a *school* Fudge would station Aurors around the grounds to keep an eye on the creatures and protect the students.

"Maybe he thinks the teachers are sufficient," Hermione offered. "I suppose a few of them must know how to fight Dementors. We've got to find out how." The burning look in her eyes was that of the research-monster unleashed. Once Hermione decided she wanted to know something, she was as determined as a bloodhound that had spotted prey.

Harry gave her a grim smile. "I already know how," he said. "It's called the—"

"Potter. Weasley. Granger."

Harry turned to see his Head of House emerging from the shadows. He beckoned the three of them over, and they left the stream of students making their way into the Great Hall for the Welcoming Feast. "Yes, Professor?" Harry replied politely.

"I hear each of you had...a bit of an *issue* with a Dementor. Madam Pomfrey wants me to take the three of you to her for an examination. Come," he ordered gruffly. He was clearly quite irritated. Harry was hardly surprised by the fact that his heart's desire was not to nursemaid students. Still shivering from the cold and remnants of the adrenaline that had flooded their systems, the trio obediently followed.

Madam Pomfrey took one glance at Harry as he entered the Hospital Wing and immediately began to fuss over him. He assured the Mediwitch that he was fine, but she didn't believe it until she'd taken his temperature twice, fed him a large slab of chocolate, and given him instructions to 'not do anything stressful for a bit.' She repeated

the process with Hermione and Ginny, as Snape watched in detached amusement from the entrance to the Hospital Wing.

Once they were finished, Snape informed them that they had enough time to attend the Feast. He sent Hermione off in the direction of the Gryffindor table, then left for his spot at the Head table. Ginny and Harry made their way over to the Slytherin table and sat down next to Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass. Harry noticed Theodore Nott studying him intently, as if probing for weaknesses. It was nothing new for the secretive boy, who kept to himself most the time.

“Something hold you up?” Blaise asked as Harry began to load up his plate. Despite the horrific memories he’d been forced to relieve by the Dementor, his appetite was ravenous.

Harry gave him a questioning glance, but responded, “A Dementor entered our cabin, so Madam Pomfrey wanted to look us over. Nothing wrong with us, not that that matters to her.”

Zabini smirked, but Ginny gave Harry a disapproving glance, as if she wasn’t happy that he was treating what had happened so lightly. Harry *did* think it was a matter for concern, but he wasn’t about to indicate that in front of his peers. “I’ve never been up close and personal with a Dementor,” Blaise admitted. “Probably not an enjoyable experience.”

Harry simply nodded, and began to enjoy the feast. Ginny sat beside him, and she was looking at her empty plate, still a bit out of it. Harry leaned over. “Are you alright?” he whispered. She jumped, glanced strangely at him, and then began to load her plate with food. She was soon engrossed in a conversation with a brown-haired girl that Harry recognized at Anne Grunitch, one of Ginny’s housemates.

“How was your summer, Potter?” Daphne Greengrass asked, not actually looking at him.

“Could have been better,” he admitted. “I’m doing well now, though.” Daphne nodded, eyeing him critically. Harry was about to say something when the Headmaster stood up. Harry suddenly forgot what he was about to say, and the hall quieted.

Dumbledore wore long purple robes with a matching wizard's hat. His white beard was actually tucked into his belt. His eyes twinkled behind his half-moon spectacles. "Welcome all of you to a new year at Hogwarts. To those of you joining us for the first time, I wish you luck in your new classes and hope that you have just begun the most enjoyable seven years of your young lives."

He paused. "However, I must also warn you. As most of you know, Sirius Black escaped from Azkaban two weeks ago. The man is unbalanced and quite dangerous, and the Ministry is frantically attempting to apprehend him. However, to protect the student body, we have taken a measure of which I am not in favor. I'm sure a number of you encountered a Dementor for the first time." Harry noticed his eyes fall on him, Hermione, and Ginny. "These creatures have been stationed around the Grounds, and are on loan from Azkaban. Their task is to find and recapture Sirius Black."

He looked over the assembled students once more. "I cannot impress upon you enough the danger that Dementors represent. You must neither approach them, nor get in their way. Some of you are aware of the capabilities of these creatures, capabilities which I will not discuss." Dumbledore looked disgusted by the mere thought of those abilities. Harry knew he was specifically referring to the Dementor's Kiss. "Those who are not aware need only to know that to run afoul of a Dementor is among the worst fates than can befall a wizard. Stay away from them, and I and the staff shall insure that they stay away from you. It is *not* in the nature of a Dementor to be forgiving." He smiled. "Now that that *dreadfully* grim announcement has been made, I urge you to enjoy the remainder of your feast. I believe that the House-Elves outdid themselves in providing us with these scrumptious meals. My sources tell me that the chicken is exquisite."

Slowly, the Great Hall began to come back to life. A few bangs and a scream from the Gryffindor table, a commotion that Harry would bet an arm and a leg on the fact that it was caused by Fred and George Weasley, seemed to complete the school-wide resurrection. Soon all one could hear was the clink of silverware and the pleasant chatter of the students.

As Harry began eating, he glanced over at the students near him. Daphne was speaking to Blaise now, and Harry listened intently. It was almost as if Blaise was giving him an interactive tutorial on acceptable Slytherin behavior.

"My father spoke of the possibility of making me his Magical Heir," the blond girl said, with an air of haughtiness. "I'm sure you know that that honor was to be given to my older sister, but..."

Zabini nodded, indicating that he did indeed know what she was speaking of. Harry began to dig through his memory, but he could remember no mention of a Greengrass in all his studies of the First War. It was evident from the way that Daphne spoke that her sister was dead. It was possible that her mother was as well.

Blaise gave her a polite smile. "Congratulations then. Has a date been set for your Confirmation?"

Daphne shook her head, and Harry tried to remember the details of the ceremony Blaise was referring to. A witch or wizard's Confirmation of Magical Inheritance was a tremendously important event in a child's life. Some families eliminated the need for the rite by naming their Magical Heirs at their birth. A few lines of Latin insured that the once the wizard or witch came of age, they would not merely inherit responsibility for any property or riches of a family, but also would take on the remnants of the magic of each of the witch or wizard's predecessors. When a witch or wizard died, they took most of their magic with them, but left behind a trace that over the centuries could accumulate to a sizable reservoir. That transfer of that power to the Magical Heir of the family was the most important part of the ritual.

That said, Harry knew that gifting a newborn with that power was a calculated gamble. It was the reason that most families waited until they could judge the character and strengths of their children, and best determine if they could bear the burden. Even so, many young witches and wizards were not up to the task, the reason why the majority of the wizarding world considered the entire practice more symbolic than anything else. Daphne's case was the rare exception:

she had first manifested her family's magic at the age of twelve after she became Aurelis O'Connor's Heir at birth.

Harry was drawn out of his thoughts by Daphne's dull blue eyes staring right at him; Greengrass had apparently noticed that he was listening to the conversation. He wasn't surprised; he wasn't as practiced at eavesdropping as Nott was. The aforementioned amateur spy was currently leaning in on a conversation between Millicent Bullstrode and Elisha Moon. The Black girl appeared to be describing some kind of complicated potion of some sort. "Potter?" Greengrass asked, leaning towards him. "Care to explain why you were eavesdropping on a private conversation? Had I wished you to participate, I would have invited you to join."

Harry managed to keep himself from flinching. "I wasn't eavesdropping." He was lying, and she knew it. Still, he managed to keep a straight face, and Greengrass appeared not to care that much anyway. However, if he had not lied so smoothly, the situation would likely be different. What mattered was that he *would* have been convincing if not for Greengrass's foreknowledge.

The girl looked at him intently, studying him. Harry returned her gaze.

Daphne Greengrass carried a regal air about her; she was tall, gifted aristocratic looks. Her straight blond hair was neither beautiful nor unattractive. Her clear blue eyes betrayed no emotion, yet her gaze was searing. Slim with a deceptively delicate build, she was a typical pureblood in both appearance and behavior. She was condescending to Muggleborns and those she considered beneath her, her manners were refined and proper among those she considered equals, and she had come to Hogwarts with a fine pureblood education in all the fields of magic. Harry knew that the girl was quite intelligent, but the most remarkable thing about her was her ability to appear completely apathetic. She was adept at making her face an emotionless mask and keeping any feeling out of her voice. It was quite unnerving at times. *I made the mistake of believing she really didn't care about anything the last two years. I forgot how unlikely that would be for a girl her age. She's still a human being.*

"You're lying," she said matter-of-factly. It was impossible to tell if she was upset, angry, or even amused. She scrutinized him as if he was a particularly dense textbook, seeking hidden meanings to every word. Her eyes flicked to his scar, but remained there for only an instant. *That's interesting.* Harry had been surprised to learn that while the Slytherins would almost unconsciously search for his scar, the symbol that represented his identity, they would not *linger* there. Others would simply *stare* as if it was the most incredible thing they'd ever seen.

Harry mustered his most mysterious smile. "Perhaps. I daresay I didn't hear anything important. Though, I'm sure you are quite pleased to be receiving such a gift from your father."

Zabini blinked in confusion, then smiled at Harry. Greengrass didn't react in any way. Her eyes locked with his. "Yes, I am *quite* pleased. I certainly wish it had been under...*different* circumstances. I would give it back if I might have my mother and sister returned to me. But, alas, such is not possible." It was a demonstration of her skill at feigned apathy. She spoke of her dead family as they had been a pair of ants she had just stepped on.

Harry nodded slowly. He *wanted* to break eye contact; he was unnerved by the strange look in the girl's eyes. But this was a battle, a kind of verbal and mental dance. Daphne was testing him. Should he retreat, he would fail that test. But he needed to say something. It came to him, and Harry realized that it was what Greengrass wanted him to say. "Of course. I too would willingly surrender my fame if in exchange I could have a peaceful childhood. But it is not healthy to dwell on what might have been." He *somehow* managed to keep his voice steady, matching Daphne's tone perfectly.

"Quite," she responded crisply. To his surprise, after a few seconds, *she* broke eye contact, glancing down at her nails absently. It was as if the conversation had never taken place. Harry leaned back, knowing that he had passed that part of the test. It was a strange exchange, but Harry was almost certain that he knew exactly why she had done it. She wanted to see if he could speak of his deceased parents without showing the pain that he still felt. He was sure that it

pained her as well to speak of her late mother and sister. He was also convinced that there was more to *that* than she had revealed.

He felt Zabini tap him on the shoulder. Harry turned to face him. Blaise smiled, but Harry could almost see the gears turning in the boy's mind as he reassessed his opinion of his new friend. His face split into a wide grin. "Nice job mate," he said, sounding impressed. "I doubt that was easy for you."

Harry shrugged. "It wasn't that difficult." He spoke with a great deal more confidence than he felt. If it had been anything, *trying* would be the best way to describe his conversation with Greengrass. "A bit awkward, to be sure, but certainly not a struggle."

Zabini let out a breath, and was staring at him almost in awe. "You made her break off first. *That* is impressive."

Harry blinked. "What?" Blaise was acting as if he'd just slain a mythical dragon. He was missing something, that was for sure.

Zabini looked at him like he'd grown another head, clearly baffled by his lack of understanding. "Boy, you don't know *anything*, do you?" Harry was starting to understand what he meant. He really *didn't* know much about his housemates, simply because he didn't spend any time around them. He was now certain of exactly what Blaise wanted.

"And you would be happy to help me with that problem?" Harry asked innocently. Zabini's lips curled upward.

He extended his hand. "What are friends for, Potter?" he asked rhetorically. Harry took it and shook firmly.

He smiled back, his expression betraying nothing of the anxiety he felt of extending his trust to this boy he barely knew. Thoughts of Riddle, of how he'd played upon what remained of his innocence and naivety swirled through Harry's mind. He remembered how Riddle had presented himself as a kindred soul, gained his sympathy and finally, his confidence. Still, he had no choice. This was, quite simply, an offer that he couldn't refuse. And somehow, he knew that Blaise

actually sought his companionship, that he wasn't serving some more devious end.

He paused for an instant, and Blaise raised an eyebrow. Harry shrugged, still smirking. "Indeed, *Blaise*, what are friends for?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ginny staring at him. He wasn't sure what to make of *that*.

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Harry was examining his new timetable when he glanced up and saw his best friend entering the Great Hall. Or rather, *stalking* into the Great Hall.

Blaise sat beside him, eating quietly. He hadn't seen Ginny that morning. Hermione's expression grew even more irritated when she noticed both the absence of her friend and the presence of the boy that had offended her sensibilities. Her movements were stiff, her eyes narrowed, and her politeness when she asked Millicent Bullstrode if she could sit next to her obviously forced.. Her mood was not improved when Millicent looked at her like she was a gutted mouse that her cat had dragged to her, expecting praise. Her dark eyes immediately shot to Harry, who returned her glare with equal intensity.

Hermione apparently was not pleased by Millicent's implication that Harry was her keeper either. "If you don't like me, then say it to my face and don't look at *him* for an explanation," she snapped at the larger Slytherin girl.

Millicent didn't respond, she simply moved about a foot away from where she had been sitting, leaving a sizable gap between herself and the seat that Hermione now occupied. Harry watched his grumpy friend give a passable impression of a sneer as she turned to face him, she plastered a blatantly false smile on her face. Blaise looked her up and down, frowning, and she glared at him. "*What?*"

"Just wondering what put you in such a foul mood," Blaise admitted. He whistled. "You certainly don't seem to like me very much, do you?"

Hermione didn't respond to *that*, instead she roughly grabbed her timetable which Harry had offered to take from Professor McGonagall. "Where's Ginny?" she asked him, loading up her plate with sausages. Harry saw Nott watching the unwelcome Muggleborn out of the corner of his eye, but both ignored him. Merlin knew what he was up to.

Harry shrugged in response to her question. "Haven't seen her," he said. "I last saw her chatting with Melissa by the fire before I turned in."

"Who?" Hermione asked.

Harry frowned. "Melissa Quinn," he explained. "One of the Slytherin girls in her year." He wouldn't have expected Hermione to remember the girl; after all, she knew very few of the Slytherins outside of those in her year. Still, the accusing tone in her voice made him wonder if something was seriously wrong. He *knew* she didn't like Blaise much, but he suspected that there was something else eating at her. He'd have to find out later.

Nonetheless, Hermione seemed to either remember who the girl was or simply did not care. She ate in silence. As she cut her sausage with more violence than necessary, Harry made up his mind. *Something is definitely wrong*, he thought. *Even Weasley doesn't upset her this much...*

Blaise broke into his thoughts. "What electives are you taking?" he asked casually. Harry turned back to him.

"Care of Magical Creatures and Ancient Runes," Harry said, taking a sip of his pumpkin juice. "You?"

Blaise frowned slightly. "Divination and Arithmacy," he said. Hermione stiffened noticeably when she realized she'd be alone with Blaise in Arithmacy. *This is getting ridiculous*, Harry thought. *Blaise is as harmless as Slytherins get, and she's still obsessing over the fact that his family considers Muggleborns below them. I understand that she hates it when people discriminate, and that she dislikes injustice of any kind, but for Merlin's sake, Millicent just treated her like something unpleasant on her shoe and she's still focusing on Blaise!*

"Why'd you chose those two?" Blaise asked.

"Why'd you?" Harry countered.

Blaise shrugged. "Well, there is some history of Seers in my family; Mum's a Songstress, and they are kind of related; more importantly, Dad says there were a couple of people that had the Sight in some capacity in his family...As for Arithmacy? Well, I've always been good with numbers."

"It's *isn't* just about *numbers*," Hermione said with a bit of uncharacteristic arrogance. "That's just math, what *Muggles* do. Arithmacy is the study of the *Magical* properties of numbers," she explained, sounding very much like she swallowed a textbook. Still, her emphasis on the word 'Muggles' said volumes about how she felt about Harry's new friend.

Blaise smirked, and Harry winced. "Apparently you didn't read the course description. The first thing we're going to do is learn basic math. About halfway through Fourth Year, we'll start studying the history and properties of numbers. *Honestly*," huffed, doing a perfect impression of Hermione. Harry glared at him, and he smiled. It was clear he was doing this *entirely* for his own enjoyment.

Hermione was bright red, and her normally warm brown eyes were searing into Blaise like a pair of daggers. Her hand was in her robes, her fingers likely wrapped tightly around her wand. Blaise smirked back at her triumphantly.

Harry had had enough of *both* of them. "Hermione, *calm down*. Blaise, *stop provoking* her. Honestly, you two are behaving like a pair of cranky five year olds."

He was *not* going to fall into Blaise's trap and be pressured to take a side. He was going to stop this ridiculous verbal sparring (most of which was instigated by Hermione, strangely enough) and if he couldn't make them get along, he would at least ensure that they behaved with something resembling civility.

Blaise threw his hands up in a gesture of innocence, while Hermione huffed and turned away, crossing her arms across her chest. Harry

blew out a long breath. He glanced upward, and saw Luna Lovegood's dirty blonde hair disappearing out of the Great Hall. "I'll see you later, Hermione, Blaise," he said, getting to his feet.

"Harry, what are you—" Hermione began sharply.

"Later," Harry cut her off, hurrying towards the massive oak doors which were only slightly askew. He ignored the stares and whispers and bolted out of the Great Hall. He *needed* to speak to Luna, to thank her, to find out more about her. There was something, well...something he found *intriguing*, as if she could give him some piece of forbidden knowledge that explained the existence of mankind. Or something like that.

He glanced around as he exited, and saw her vanish down one of the corridors. He hurried after her. Strangely, every time he rounded a corner, he saw her disappearing around the next corner. Finally, he tracked her down, skidding to a stop as he saw her sitting idly next to one of the windows on the Fourth Floor. She stared curiously at him, mouth slightly agape. "Hello Harry Potter. You seem to have been chasing me."

"I need to talk to you," Harry explained, panting heavily. Abruptly, the urgency vanished. He started to wonder exactly why he was *here*. He frowned, knowing that Luna must have something to do with it. "How did you *do* what you just did? How did you keep staying just out of sight and leading me on this wild chase?"

Luna smiled strangely. "I didn't," she said simply. "I've been sitting here the entire time. I wondered if you might come to visit me, and you did." She frowned. "That's never happened before."

"What, that someone has visited you?" Harry asked, still trying to catch his breath. He abruptly realized how cruel and stupid that question was. Characteristically, Luna didn't take offense.

Instead, she shook her head, her necklace of butterbeer corks jingling. "No, that I managed to *call* someone far away to me." She looked pensive. "Or *maybe* it's just the Jula-Jumpas." She looked up at him, a serious expression on her face. "They sing strange songs, and people follow them. It's very odd, really."

Harry frowned, and made the mistake of trying to reason with her statements about a non-existent animal her father had taught her about. “Don’t you mean Sirens?” he asked, thinking of the creatures that were closest to what she had described.

Luna shook her head again. “No. *Sirens* are extinct; they got Nargles in their hair and drowned. And *their* singing was *beautiful*. The Julia-Jumpas have very *level* voices; they aren’t high or low. *They* sing about people running from dragons in strawberry patches.”

Harry simply tuned out her last statement. “So what *happened?*” he asked nervously. He liked Luna...sort of. She was nice enough and meant well, but she made him rather uncomfortable with the amount she seemed to know. The idea that she could compel him and even cause him to hallucinate was alarming to say the least. After Riddle, Harry was wary of being controlled in any way. *He* needed to be in control at all times.

Luna shrugged, oblivious to his concerns. “I should write Father. First I healed you, and now *this* happens...odd.”

It was rather bizarre for Luna of all people to call something odd, but Harry had to agree with her. Still, he might have used a much stronger term. Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He spun around, wand flying into his hand. The corridor was empty, except for a small rat that scuttled by. Harry figured it would end up as Mrs. Norris’s dinner.

“Wrackspurts,” Luna said with conviction. “They sneak up on you and take you over, then make you sing and dance and do things you don’t want to. It’s very frightening.” She shivered. “I do have charms and amulets I could give you,” she offered, reaching into the pocket of her robes. She pulled out a ball of twine adored with a pair of small bat wings.

“No thanks, Luna,” Harry said. “Why did I *want* to come here?...It’s not that I’m *repulsed* by the idea, but the urge was...*unnatural*...”

Luna smiled. “I wanted you to come...I didn’t do it intentionally, of course. Free will is the most important gift of all. That’s why Wrackspurts are so *evil*; they steal our free will from us.” She gazed

at him with something resembling awe, her bright blue eyes gazing into his own. "You know what I speak of. You lost your free will last year. Tom took it away from you."

Harry jerked back as if he'd been struck. His composure shattered, his nerves taking the better of him. "How do you know *that*?" he demanded. "How?"

Luna smiled. "I can see things, Harry. I told you that."

"Are you a Legillimens?" he asked. It was impossible at her age that she'd been trained in the art. He *had* heard of individuals being *born* with the ability to see into the minds of others, though it was *extraordinarily* rare... *Maybe that's it. I suppose that being able to read other people's minds, to see their deepest thoughts, would make her this...odd. And perhaps the death of her mother unbalanced her slightly...*

Luna shook her head, blowing that theory out of the water. "I'm different. I just...*know* things," she explained. "I don't have to *try* to see into their minds, I just *think* it and...I *know*," she whispered. "Everyone would think I was *crazy* if I *told* them, so I don't. Father is the only one that knows...and now you. I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell *anyone* else. I've told you things that no one but Father and I know."

"But wouldn't it be a good idea to let Dumbledore know?" Harry asked her. "He might be able to train you to control your...ability. Wouldn't you like to only know things you *wanted* to know?"

Luna frowned at him. "What are you *talking* about?" she demanded. It was the first time he'd ever heard anger in her voice. "I'm perfectly *happy*. I *like* knowing things, thank you very much." She sniffed, and Harry could see her eyes glistening with tears. He immediately felt terrible remorse.

"Luna, I'm sorry-

"I thought you understood me..." she said miserably. "I was wrong. I was *stupid*. I should have *seen* it in your head." She shook her own head violently. "No...go, *now*. I don't want to speak to you anymore."

Harry wanted to leave, but something deep within him would not allow him to go without addressing something first. "I will. But first you need to promise me that you won't...*trick* me again."

Luna glanced up at him, brushing away a few stray tears. He felt guilty, but mostly, he wanted this conversation to end. His mind was spinning. "Why should I?" she snapped. "You said that I was *foolish*."

"No I didn't," Harry protested. "I made a stupid assumption. I shouldn't have just assumed that you didn't like the way that you were. I understand, really, I do. And I'm sorry for upsetting you...but you must understand, I'm *afraid* of being controlled." He wasn't sure why he was telling her this, but something told him he needed to. Nor was he completely sure he believed what he just said, but it *was* working. "It scares me that someone was able to control me that easily, that he was able to hurt my friends. I *need* to be in control, don't you understand? Please, don't do it again." He knew it sounded like he was begging, but strong-arm tactics weren't going to work with this girl.

Luna looked at him again, her eyes cloudy with an indiscernible emotion. "Alright, I won't do it anymore. I didn't mean what I said...well, I *did*, but you understand what you said was hurtful." She looked at him strangely, then smiled. "You're very odd, Harry Potter, for a boy. Most boys are stupid and focused on sports and being 'manly.' You understand *girls*. That's very strange, Harry Potter. You are *very lucky*."

Harry wasn't sure how to respond to *that*. As it turned out, he didn't have to. Luna hopped off the windowsill and disappeared down the corridor, skipping jovially. Harry was left standing alone, staring after her. He sat down and placed his head in his hands, trying to comprehend the very strange exchange he had just had with Luna Lovegood.

"Where have you *been*?" Hermione hissed as he hurried towards the Transfiguration Classroom. She was standing with her arms crossed over her chest, tapping her toe impatiently.

Harry hurried towards her, shaking his head. "I was talking to Luna...something strange happened..."

Hermione frowned and opened her mouth to ask something, but then the bell rang. "We'll talk about it later," she said, grabbing Harry by the sleeve of his robes and hauling him inside the classroom. Harry glanced up and saw Professor McGonagall taking attendance. Harry walked over towards where Nott, Blaise, and Greengrass sat, despite Hermione's nonverbal protests. She glared at the Black boy as she sat down, turning her attention to Professor McGonagall. Blaise smirked back at her.

Harry sighed dramatically and sat down between Blaise and Hermione. Professor McGonagall called out the names of the rest of the class, then began the lesson. "Well, normally I would be going over our aims for this upcoming term, but as this class is composed of Third Years, I would like to see just how much you recall from the past year. Thus, we will be doing a number of review exercises."

She explained they would be reviewing inanimate object to living being Transfiguration. She gave each of them a white rabbit and told them to turn them into a pair of fuzzy slippers. Harry found Transfiguring animals into objects to be the easiest type of Transfiguration. In general, it was tougher to Transfigure an inanimate physical object into a living creature, and more difficult to Transfigure one living creature into a creature of a different phyla or class; Transfiguring mammals into reptiles, avians into mammals, etc. By far the most difficult form of Transfiguration was Conjuring. Anything could be conjured, from small animals to food. Most of the time, the conjured objects faded, but more powerful wizards could make the Conjured objects or animals permanent. Harry had heard of extraordinarily powerful wizards having the capacity to Conjure powerful magical creatures such as dragons and phoenixes, but no one had succeeded in making these creatures permanent.

Harry found the procedure they were practicing to be so simple that he actually wasn't paying enough attention, and ended up creating slippers with whiskers, ears, and a twitching nose. If anything, it at least improved Hermione's mood as she laughed at the stunned look on his face. Blushing madly, he glared at her, refocused and completed his task. Two dead rabbits (and a great number of spilled tears) later, Lavender Brown beat Seamus Finnegan in the Great Slipper Race, and McGonagall collected the slippers, effortlessly

Transfigured them back into rabbits, and put them back a large cage. Harry figured they would either be used in other classes or given to one of Hagrid's pets as dinner. Next, she gave them a slightly greater challenge, and handed out a number of water goblets, with the instruction to turn them into rats. They'd practiced it the previous year, but it still took four tries for Harry to get rid of the shiny, glass-like shine on the rat's fur. Hermione got hers on the first try, and got the ten points from McGonagall. She stuck her tongue out at him, and it was obvious that she was feeling a great deal more cheerful. Harry could only be so happy with that as her good mood was coming at *his* expense.

With Ron Weasley and a number of other students still struggling, including, surprisingly, Elisha Moon, the bell finally rang. McGonagall collected the rats, turned the half-Transfigured rodents back into goblets, and assigned those who had failed to complete the assignment to do it for homework.

Their next class would be Defense Against the Dark Arts. Most of the students were eagerly awaiting the first class, hoping that Lupin could at least teach them more than Lockhart ever had. Harry was simply interested to see how his father's friend went about teaching the class. Harry knew that Third Year was devoted to learning about various Dark creatures, while Fourth Year was an introduction to curses. The first two years were supposed to have covered general defensive theory and basic defensive spells, but the teachers had accomplished neither. All they'd learned from Lockhart was a bunch of inaccurate information about creatures and non-existent spells. Quirrell had somehow managed to teach them absolutely *nothing*. You'd think that even with Voldemort in his head, he might manage to teach something by accident...

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"Alright, that's all for today," Remus told his First Year class of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. "I want you all to read pages 13-17 of Chapter One and write a brief paragraph on the basic differences between Dark and Light spells. Keep in mind that the distinctions that I'm teaching you are certainly not *complete*. They are a basic set of

criteria to be used to introduce you to the important differences. Thank you for a very enjoyable first class."

The students began to file out, many of them whispering excitedly. Remus felt a surge of pride and happiness as he heard many of them saying that he was the best professor that they'd ever had. It was truly the most gratifying job he'd ever taken. Most of the young students were eager to learn and appreciated his hands-on approach. He'd put the students into small groups and asked them to come up with a list of differences between Light and Dark magic. Some of the lists were very inaccurate, but simply getting each student involved in the discussion was worth something. Remus personally believed that the Ministry guidelines involving what was Dark magic were rather strict, but he wasn't going to get into the finer differences with a bunch of eleven-year olds.

As they filed out, Remus headed into his office. He glanced at his schedule and saw that he had his Third Year Slytherin and Gryffindor class, the one that he'd been looking forward to since the first day he'd arrived at Hogwarts. He'd been casually observing Harry at meals and in the corridors, and while he still knew relatively little about the boy, he could tell that he was certainly not his father's son. The differences extended far beyond his green and silver Slytherin robes.

He had something very special planned. He had decided that he wanted to immediately contrast himself to the poor teachers of the past two years. He'd heard that all they did was have the students read from the text books and that they had done very little practical work. He intended to change that.

The idea had come to him by sheer chance.

He'd gone to visit Argus Filch that first day he had arrived, searching for a relic of his past: the Marauder's Map. He knew that James had been caught stealing food from the kitchens near the end of Seventh Year, and Filch had confiscated it, though he had no idea what it was. Filch had been suspicious when he had come looking for it, but he explained to the Squib just how useful it might be in tracking down

Sirius Black. That had been all it had taken; Filch hated Sirius for how the boy had tormented him during his school days.

Unfortunately, when Remus searched Filch's filing cabinet, he'd been shocked to discover the Map missing. He'd been quite puzzled by that, and a bit alarmed that it had apparently vanished into thin air. He knew that Filch could not have burned it; James had put so many charms onto the paper that nothing short of Phoenix fire could scratch it. So that meant one thing: it was in the hands of a student. That was *not* a very pleasant thought.

He had suspects, of course. One thing Minerva had told him about was the legendary Weasley twins, whom she claimed were the most troubling pair of youngsters she'd been forced to deal with since the Marauders themselves. The two were extremely intelligent, seemed to have the capacity to read each other's minds, and appeared to be rather powerful as well. Remus would get to know them personally tomorrow, along with the rest of the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor Fifth Years.

Of course, the most important thing he'd found in Filch's cabinet was the Boggart that would be the object of his first class. The Squib had been pleased to be rid of it.

Remus replaced his copy of the First Year textbook, *Defense Against the Dark Arts: The Essentials for Beginners*, and picked up his new attendance list. He scanned it briefly, and frowned when he recognized several sons or daughters of known Death Eaters: Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, and Parkinson. *And Harry shares a dormitory with almost all of them. Quite remarkable.*

He re-entered his classroom and saw that a number of people in the class had already taken their seats. A few glanced up at him, and Remus noticed a boy with combed silver-blonde hair, clearly a Malfoy, staring at his teacher's worn robes with disgust. Two Slytherins sat on either side of Malfoy, large boys whom Remus guessed were Vincent Crabbe Jr. and Gregory Goyle Jr. *How appropriate*, he thought. *Their fathers followed Lucius around like a pair of lost puppies during the war as well.* Remus smiled back at Lucius's son, which seemed to irritate him, then stood at the front of the class. He spotted a boy he

instantly realized was Neville Longbottom, looking rather dejected and lonely. Sitting a few seats away from him, chatting away, was a redhead, likely a Weasley, a Black boy and a boy speaking with a noticeable Irish accent. All four were Gryffindors.

After a pair of Gryffindor girls who were gossiping loudly walked in, the group Remus was waiting for finally arrived. Harry led them; Remus could spot his untamable hair and bright green eyes a mile away. Just behind them was Hermione and a Slytherin boy that Remus didn't recognize. Hermione looked quite displeased to be standing next to him, and hurried up to Harry's side. Remus was sure there was a story there.

When the last student, a girl that Remus immediately recognized as Pansy Parkinson entered, he cleared his throat, drawing the attention of the class. "Hello class, I'm Remus Lupin, your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher." He paused, making sure they were paying attention. When the two gossipy Gryffindors stopped speaking and gave him pretty smiles in apology, he cleared his throat and continued. "I'll take attendance, and then we'll do something that should be a great deal more *interesting* than anything your previous instructors assigned." The excitedly whispers and murmurs that this pronouncement led to told Remus he finally had their full attention. He took attendance quickly, then clapped his hands in excitement. "Alright, today's will be a practical lesson, so you may put away your books. All you'll require is your wands. Please follow me."

He led them down the corridor towards the classroom where he'd placed the chest with the Boggart (Filch wasn't going to let him have the filing cabinet.) He actually knew of another one, apparently located in the Staffroom, but thought he'd save that one for his other Third Year class. As they turned a corner, Remus heard a voice he hadn't heard for over a decade. A dreadfully irritating sing-song voice, likely honed to perfection over centuries. It was a voice that was often a harbinger of water balloons, falling objects, trip jinxes, and other minor annoyances.

Peeves.

"Loony, Loopy, Lupin! Loony, Loopy, Lupin!"

He glanced up to see Peeves the Poltergeist sitting cross-legged in the air, his dark eyes sparkling with mirth, his revolting orange bow tie waggling back and forth. He began bellowing at the top of his lungs, and Remus had an idea. He noticed that Peeves had been in the process of stuffing a wad of gum into the doorknob of a broom closet. "I recommend you remove that, Peeves. Mr. Filch will not be able to access his brooms."

As he expected, Peeves ignored him, and continued singing, adding in a number of profanities and wet raspberries as sound effects. Remus sighed, aimed his wand at the door, and murmured. "This is a useful little spell." *I've always wanted to do this...*

He snapped his wrist up so that it was pointed at Peeves as he yelled, "*Waddiwassi!*" As he hoped, the gum shot out of the keyhole and flew straight at Peeves. It went up his left nostril, instead of his mouth, as Remus had expected, but nonetheless, the mischievous poltergeist swore and flew away, banging into the walls. Many of the students laughed outright, and Remus saw that Harry was smiling. His spirits were lifted instantly. "That is how to deal with a Poltergeist. If you are well-behaved, I might teach you that little spell."

At least among the Gryffindors, Remus knew that he was making a very good impression. Some of the Slytherins thought his behavior childish, and others, such as Malfoy, were so determined to hate him that there wasn't *anything* he could do to gain their approval. *And that's why I can't bother to try to impress them. Dumbledore gave me this wonderful opportunity, and not only am I going to take advantage of it, I'm going to damn well enjoy it.*

He led them into the deserted classroom, the desks and chairs shoved up against the wall. In the center was a battered old trunk. The class stared at it. "What, is this charity case going to teach us to fight *baggage*?" Draco Malfoy sneered, speaking just loudly enough so that everyone heard him. Remus ignored him, but noticed that a few of the Gryffindors looked murderous. Remus decided to introduce the lesson before a brawl or duel broke out.

He smiled at them. "As amusing as such a lesson would be, Mr. Malfoy, I don't want any of you to get hurt." There was scattered

snickers from the Gryffindors, and Malfoy blushed as he glared at him. “No, today we will learning to fight the *creature* in that chest.” As he spoke, the chest shook violently. “Would anyone like to guess *what* is inside?”

Several hands went up. Remus pointed to the excitedly bouncing limb of Hermione Granger. “Miss Granger?”

“A Boggart,” she said simply.

Remus smiled. “Exactly. Two points to Gryffindor. Now, would anyone care to tell me exactly what a Boggart is?”

Hermione’s hand shot up again, but Remus decided to pick elsewhere. “Yes, Mr..?”

“Nott,” the dark-haired boy replied shortly. “A Boggart is also known as a shape-shifter. They are unique in that they transform into whatever a witch or wizard fears most.” Remus nodded, impressed.

“Good. Five points to Slytherin.” A few groans and looks of disbelief came from several of the Gryffindors. Remus felt the urge to shake his head. *Surely they didn’t think I’d be the anti-Snape? Just because I was Gryffindor doesn’t mean I’ll favor them.*

“Alright, now, we have an advantage, being in a large group. Has anyone spotted it? Mr. Potter?” he called.

“Boggart are least effective facing large groups of wizards because they cannot mimic more than one fear at once...well, they can, but not very well. Often, the combination of fears is rather humorous, which is what a Boggart seeks to avoid,” Harry said, answering with a kind of smug self-confidence that Remus was accustomed to seeing from his father at this age. Of course, there was a difference: Harry seemed to be aware of his limitations, James was unaware that they existed.

“Excellent. Five more points to Slytherin.” More groans. “Mr. Weasley, as you seem quite unhappy with my awarding of points to Slytherin House, I’ll invite you to answer this next question.” The boy swallowed thickly, obviously feeling unprepared. “As Mr. Potter said,

Boggarts seek to avoid appearing in any way humorous. What does that imply about the techniques to defeat them?"

The boy was clearly caught off guard, and glanced at his friends, at the walls, at anything that might give him the answer. Malfoy and few others snickered, and Remus was surprised to see Harry smirking triumphantly. *That* was not behavior he would have expected. "Well...um...you try to make them funny?" he guessed, looking hopeful.

Remus smiled. Often, the best way to find an answer was to simply go with what sounded right. "Exactly, Mr. Weasley. Five points to Gryffindor."

The boy beamed and glared pointedly at Harry. Remus was disappointed to see him mouth something at the boy. Whatever it was, Ron immediately paled and stopped looking at him. *What the devil is going on there?*

He pulled himself back to his class. "Well, we know what a Boggart is and how to defeat it, but does anyone know the *incantation*?" Hermione's hand shot up again. Harry's did not.

Faced with only one choice, he pointed to her. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

"It's a special spell that only works on Boggarts," she said matter-of-factly. "The incantation is *Riddikulus*."

Remus was impressed. She had obviously read through her textbooks. A few of the purebloods sneered at the Muggleborn girl, and Ron whispered something that sounded suspiciously like, "bloody know-it-all." Perhaps Remus had made a mistake by allowing her to answer twice. It was clear her reputation was well-known. He knew what it felt like to be called a bookworm. Of course, he much preferred being called that over being called what really distinguished himself from everyone else. "Excellent, Hermione. Ten points to Gryffindor." The girl beamed at him.

"Alright, everyone repeat the incantation a few times." They did. "Now, what Miss Granger did not mention is that simply saying the spell is not enough. What each of you must do is visualize the thing that

frightens you the most, and try to imagine a way to make it appear humorous. It isn't always easy, especially if you aren't sure of what you are most frightened of. If anyone wishes to refrain from participating, I understand completely." No one did, as he'd expected. Appearing too frightened to face a Boggart was not a way to impress a student's peers. Remus looked over the class, and had to admit he was interested to see what a number of them would encounter. Then his eyes rested on Harry, and he abruptly realized there might be a problem. "Mr. Potter, if I could see you for a moment," he said softly.

Harry approached him, looking a bit puzzled. "Yes, Professor?"

"Harry," he whispered quietly, "I need to know what you think you will see. Unlike most of the students here, you have seen a great deal of true horrors in your life, and one thing I simply do not need on my first day in Lord Voldemort materializing in the classroom."

Harry cocked his head to the side, staring at Remus with a strangely cold and calculated expression, mixed with a bit of...*amusement*? "Professor, I assure you that won't be a problem." He paused for a moment. "I'm not completely certain what I'll see, but he is not the person that frightens me the most." To his surprise, and intense discomfort, Harry shivered.

"Are you *sure* you want to participate?" he asked again, truly concerned. Harry blinked.

"I'm fine, trust me. It won't be a problem," he said in a slightly distracted-sounding voice. Remus wasn't sure if he believed him. It didn't look like Harry was sure that he believed himself.

"Alright then," Remus conceded. "I'll trust you."

Harry retreated to his friends near the middle of the line. The students were pushing and jostling each other, some trying to get close to the front, others making for the back. At the front of the line was Theodore Nott. Behind him, looking quite anxious, was Neville Longbottom. Remus remembered that Minerva had said that the boy was very lacking in self-confidence, fears reinforced by his Potions professor. "Neville, if you could start us off?" he said. Nott grudgingly

moved back. "Now, Mr. Longbottom, if you might tell us what you fear the most?"

Neville mumbled something, and Nott's eyebrows rose. "Could you be a bit louder?"

"Professor Snape..." the boy mumbled. A few students laughed, and Neville gave a forced smile. Remus nodded, frowning. *How to make Severus less frightening...* "Well, Neville...hmm...I believe you live with Augusta, your grandmother?" Remus knew of the imposing woman. He also remembered her favorite attire, and the mental image of the two combined was stunningly amusing.

"Yes sir," Neville said. "But I don't want it to turn into *her* either," he said quickly. They were a few snickers, obviously from children who had never met Augusta Longbottom. It wasn't in the least bit shocking that Neville was frightened of her.

"Hmmm...can you picture her clothing, Neville? What does she wear?" Remus asked, smiling encouragingly.

The boy looked up at him, confused. "She wears green robes with a red handbag...oh, and a red hat with a vulture." Apparently, Augusta hadn't changed her favorite outfit since Remus had known Frank. *Oh this is going to be good...*

"Excellent. Now, I want you to concentrate on those clothes, then on Professor Snape...do you see where I am going with this?" The boy nodded, a faint smile on his face. Then he frowned.

"You want me to imagine Professor Snape...in *Gran's clothing?*" he asked in disbelief. A few Gryffindors snickered. Remus nodded, urging him forward. "Alright. I'm ready," he said, drawing himself up to his full height. Remus gave him another reassuring smile, then waved his wand and opened the chest.

First the head, then the torso, then the full body of Severus Snape, cape flapping around him, a vicious sneer on his face, rose out of the chest. Neville took a step back, and Remus put a hand on his shoulder. Several Slytherins were laughing at Neville's fright. "Go on, Neville, you can do it," he coaxed.

The boy took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Snape advanced quickly. “*Riddikulus!*” Neville cried, opening his eyes. There was a loud CRACK, and the Boggart staggered. Remus was confronted with one of the most amusing sights he’d ever seen. Boggart-Snape was now looking at himself in confusion, specifically, the green dress, the battered red handbag, and the red hat topped with a moth-eaten vulture. Harry and Hermione were laughing hard.

Remus chuckled jovially. “Excellent, Neville! Alright, the rest of you now! Nott!” he cried. The boy marched up towards the Boggart. There was a CRACK, and standing before him was something that caused quite a few gasps and screams. It was a tall, zombie-like figure, its flesh decomposed and quite a bit of muscle and bone showing. Remus recognized the gruesome creature immediately. *They only question is how Theodore knows what an Inferi looks like...*

If the boy was frightened, Remus couldn’t tell. He hesitated for a second, then raised his wand and cried, “*Riddikulus!*” The Inferi began to fall apart, its legs liquefying as it collapsed to the floor. The flesh continued to decompose, exposing more gore, and as Nott watched, a growing grin on his face, the remaining pieces of the Inferi crumbled into dust. The Slytherin boy laughed, a harsh, cold bark. Remus felt the urge to be sick. Nott turned away, striding towards the back of the classroom. Remus couldn’t understand for the life of him how anyone could find *that* amusing.

Parvati Patil was pushed forward by the line, and the pile of dust transformed into a towering Egyptian Mummy, pieces of cloth hanging off it. It raised its arms as it advanced. Parvati cast the spell, and the wrapping began to unwind, spinning the body around in circles. Parvati laughed, along with most of the class. It was much less gruesome Boggart than her predecessor’s.

Next up was Dean Thomas, whose Boggart was a severed hand. It flapped along the ground towards Dean, who was sweating noticeably. Then he cried the incantation, and Remus watched as the hand became caught in a mousetrap. Ron Weasley was next, and his Boggart was a giant arachnid. Ron looked absolutely terrified, but weakly said, “*Ri-ridikulus!*” and the legs of the creature vanished. Ron laughed weakly, and fled. Obviously, his fear of spiders ran rather

deep. Seamus Finnegan silenced his Banshee. Daphne Greengrass stepped forward next. Her greatest fear was something that Remus had only seen in books. A massive creature with the tail of a dragon, the body of a goat, and the head of a lion. A Chimaera.

Daphne narrowed her eyes, then said in a level voice, “*Riddikulus*.” The creature vanished for a moment in a cloud of smoke, then with a CRACK, reappeared. The mane was shaved, a pair of intertwined goat horns were sticking out of its skull, and the horned tail had become a white and fluffy rabbit’s tail. Daphne giggled slightly at the sight, and retreated, causing a number of Slytherins to stare at her in confusion. Remus was impressed by the multiple changes. Daphne Greengrass was obviously a girl of great focus and skill.

Draco Malfoy was next, but as he stepped forward, Remus could see the sweat shining on his forehead. He was clearly extremely nervous. Remus stepped forward, but before the distorted Chimaera could catch sight of Draco, he fled. In his haste, he knocked the two students standing behind him to the floor. They fell forward. It was Harry and Hermione.

Remus, at first, was somewhat pleased. Even if Harry’s Boggart was Voldemort or something equally disturbing, perhaps even his guardian attacking him, (it sounded possible from Albus’s description of what had transpired in the Chamber of Secrets,) it would combine with Hermione’s Boggart, and be either too distorted for the class to figure out what it was or not in the least bit frightening.

What Remus had *not* been expecting was that the Boggarts of Harry Potter and Hermione Granger would be *identical*.

With a CRACK, the worst fear of the two friends materialized. Remus sucked in a breath, his eyes wide. Harry and Hermione, struggling to untangle themselves and get off the floor, froze in shock. Harry paled dramatically as he caught sight of it.

Standing over the Harry and Hermione was a figure of medium height, with jet-black hair that Remus had seen in two consecutive generations. He was dressed in black robes, and in his left hand was the same wand that Harry currently clutched tightly in his own fist. But as Remus stared, the reasons why this...creature haunted the

memories of both students because painfully apparent. Instead of the bright emerald green eyes of Lily Potter, twin crimson slits glared down at the two on the floor. The face was contorted into a mocking sneer, and the figure laughed chillingly at the terrified thirteen-year olds.

The Boggart raised his wand and incanted two words. As the burst of green light exploded from the end of his wand, his sleeve slid down his left arm, revealing a patch of charred flesh that depicted a serpent slithering out the mouth of a skull.

### The Dark Mark.

A number of people screamed. The rest seemed absolutely terrified. Even Daphne Greengrass and Theodore Nott looked somewhat alarmed.

Remus burst into action, flinging himself in front of his two stricken students, who were obviously in no state to defend themselves. The Boggart vanished with a CRACK, replaced by a silver orb. Remus actually didn't mind the sight; it was the only time he could see a full moon without transforming. Before anyone could get a good look, he bellowed, "*RIDDIKULUS!*" and the orb became a punctured balloon. Remus guided it back to the chest, and stepped forward in front of the two students on the floor. "Alright, good job," he said, his voice shaking somewhat. "Ten points to each of you that faced the Boggart. No homework."

The class got the message, and most of the girls scampered from the room. Many gave Harry and Hermione, who were slowly getting to their feet, a strange or frightened look. As they turned to go, Remus took a deep breath, closing his eyes. "Miss Granger, Mr. Potter, please stay." No sooner had he said it than he heard a gasp and a frantic scurrying of feet.

Remus opened his eyes just in time to see Hermione flee from the classroom. Harry made to follow her, but Remus walked forward and placed a hand on his shoulder. Harry jumped in surprise, and glanced up at him. "Harry, I'm sure she'll be fine. She's frightened, but I'm sure she's just gone somewhere to calm down. In the meantime..."

He paused, lost for words, then finally found his voice. "I need you to tell what exactly that was."

Harry stiffened, glanced out the door, then sighed, defeated. His shoulders slumped, and his eyes were tired and lifeless. "Alright."

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A/N: Well, I personally thought this chapter was much better. Luna is becoming a much more fascinating character than I could have imagined. The number of directions I can take her is endless.

Alright, it's time for some more long, detailed author's notes to address a failure of communication between my story and my readers. A number of you have expressed concern that Harry is A) Acting too mature B) Becoming Super!Harry, and C) Growing up too fast. Well, those concerns are all rather reasonable. That's why I need to explain something.

First, despite Daphne's best efforts, the results of Harry just vaguely knowing his role in the future of the wizarding world are painfully apparent, and are not very positive. Harry's sense of urgency, desire for control, and ambition are running away with him, and he's trying to do something rather *stupid*. He's trying to not only win the respect of his peers (and by consequence their parents) in a ridiculously short amount of time, but he's also trying to enter into a game that he is simply not ready for. He needs to relax. To use a baseball analogy, he's like a guy coming up with the bases empty and trying to hit a 5-run homer. That, of course, is not possible. He has a hell of a lot of growing to do to have any chance to gain allies, power or no power. He is most certainly not Super!Harry because he will most likely kill himself if he attempts to wield the power he possesses. It's one thing to casually attempt to be more social and not entirely ignore the existence of your peers. It's another to try to win the respect of Theodore Nott, who as you can see is a bit...shall we say, DARK. Many of the purebloods, especially the Slytherins, have either had personal relationships with each other or at least known each other from a young age. Harry cannot simply bypass that stage. Harry is, quite simply, being as reactionary and impulsive as the worst Gryffindor. Certain people close to him aren't going to let him get away with that.

Blaise is not always business, as you can see. He's capable of acting like a thirteen-year old, and will keep Harry grounded. His character still needs time to develop.

As for the ships, I've decided the best choice is to just let the characters develop as they will. It's worked quite well for Daphne; my idea for the character has sort of taken on a life of its own. So please, for the sake of my sanity, STOP ASKING. When we get a little farther, I might entertain comments. I don't mean this as a slight to you in any way. In fact, this is a perfect example of why I really do need you to review. My mind works in strange way sometimes, and that's not always a good thing. I think I've got ideas, and I've got a lot of time. Harry isn't thinking about potential girlfriends right now.

On the subject of the Sacrifices Arc and Lightning on the Wave. First, I realize I made a rather blatant boo-boo in making Blaise's mum a Songstress. That is indeed unique to LotW's work. I apologize for that, and promise to make any further details about her unique to my imagination. I'm keeping it, but I intend it as a tribute to the greatness of her storytelling that I thought it was canon. There are inevitably going to be other things that are very similar to her ideas, Magical Heirs being one of them. I'm really doing my best not to plagiarize, it's not fair to either of us. Please don't think that of me, it makes me cry. Not really. Still, I do care.

After that rather confusing statement, I want to shed some light on my portrayal of Sirius. In canon, Sirius Black broke out of Azkaban because he has a mind set on one thing: killing Peter Pettigrew and avenging the Potters. Nothing else. He neither gave thought to using his old friend Remus to capture Pettigrew and prove his innocence, nor enlisting the help of Dumbledore, who likely would have given him a chance to prove himself (if my impression of JKR's Dumbledore is accurate.) He, in his own words, wanted to "Commit the murder I was imprisoned for." Now, apply that to this situation. James's son is potentially learning the Dark Arts, (which isn't all that far from the truth. Sirius despises the Dark Arts because he associates them with his parents. With only Rita Skeeter's sensationalist writing as a source of information, he focuses on "knowing spells that they definitely don't teach second years.") That sets off alarm bells in his head. He thinks of Daphne. He remembers wading through the gory remains of the

Death Eaters she massacred. He, along with everyone else, thought that she'd fallen from the Light. Now he finds out that Daphne is Harry's guardian, and Harry is learning the Dark Arts. Do you see where I'm going here? To go further, imagine what will happen when he finds out the details of what happened in the Chamber.

Alright, I've pleaded my case enough. I really hope this helps explain where I'm coming from. If you haven't guessed, this story is going to be considerably longer than the last two. Normally by chapter nine, I'm at Christmas, not just starting school.

Please, just forget about the ships for now. PLEASE.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS! Seriously, I need reviews to help improve this story. While I certainly like positive reviews, I don't need to be rewarded. But I can't address problems with the story if people don't tell me what's wrong.

## Chapter 9: Shattered Assumptions

*Previous Chapter:*

*Remus glanced up to see Hermione flee from the classroom. Harry made to follow her, but Remus walked forward and placed a hand on his shoulder. Harry jumped in surprise, and glanced up at him. “Harry, I’m sure she’ll be fine. She’s frightened, but I’m sure she’s just gone somewhere to calm down. In the meantime...” He paused, lost for words, and then finally found his voice. “I need you to tell what exactly that was.”*

*Harry stiffened, glanced out the door, and then sighed, defeated. His shoulders slumped, and his eyes were tired and lifeless. “Alright.”*

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Harry knew that he was trapped. As much as he wanted to go after Hermione, who was likely searching for a place to curl up and let out her fear and despair, Remus deserved to know what had just happened in his classroom. And as inconvenient a time as it was to get to know one of his father’s best friends, he knew he would need to have a long conversation with the man sooner or later. It wasn’t as if he could eat lunch now anyway.

Remus’s eyes were clear blue, but appeared dulled, like a pair of old marbles. When the light hit them a certain way, Harry could see a flash of amber. Harry knew only a little bit about werewolves, but one thing he remembered was that when they became angry, their eye color changed as the wolf fought for control. Even in human form, many werewolves were aggressive fighters. Harry could also see the toll of the strain of hundreds of transformations on the lined, weathered face of the man not yet thirty-five years old. His brown hair was graying prematurely, and had Harry not known his true age, he would have guessed Lupin was at least fifteen years older.

Harry met his gaze, trying to calm his racing pulse. The Boggart had been truly alarming, but perhaps the most shocking was that Harry understood exactly why he saw what he did. *They say that children often end up a lot like their parents*, Harry thought. *And Daphne’s worst fear, her biggest worry at all times, is losing control. That is*

*what Riddle represents; a time in my life where I can be used to kill and maim those I care about and be entirely unable to stop it. It's not exactly surprising that Hermione's Boggart is the same. Didn't she tell me that she always feared that I would be just like I was in all those ridiculous rumors Ron Weasley spread?*

Remus was looking at him now. He looked somewhat expectant, but also as if he was at a loss for words. Harry supposed that the latter was probably true. "Harry?" the man asked again, swallowing hard.

Harry closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. He tried to push the images out of his mind, using the rudimentary Occlumency skills that he had mastered in his brief study of the mind art. "That was..." he began, but lost his nerve. He fought to regain it. "...that was Tom Riddle," he said simply. He knew it was an insufficient explanation, and that Remus might have no idea what he was talking about.

Remus frowned, and then recognition flashed in his eyes. "Dumbledore told me about what happened last year, but wasn't quite that detailed...at least not about what happened at school. He said you were possessed by an object, a diary."

"That's correct," Harry said. He felt exhausted. "Could we sit down?"

Remus gestured towards his office. He took his seat behind the worn desk, conjuring a chair in front of it. Harry sat down. It was obvious that Remus hadn't finished unpacking. The office was cluttered with all kinds of books, equipment, and suitcases. "Forgive the mess, I've been busy," his professor said sheepishly. Harry merely nodded. "So what I just saw was...something from a *diary*?" he asked, sounding unconvinced.

"Well, to be perfectly honest, what you just saw was...me..." Harry admitted, trying to think of how to best word this. "You saw my body possessed by Tom Riddle...the Dark Mark...I'm not sure about that, I suppose that connects me with Voldemort." To Harry's satisfaction, not only was Remus able to say the Dark Lord's name without stumbling over it during their private conversation in class, he didn't flinch when Harry said it aloud. "I...attacked Hermione last year...that's why she's so frightened of me...like that," Harry

explained, realizing he might be doing more to confuse his Defense teacher than properly explain what had transpired. "I'm not sure if this makes any sense, but..."

"No, I understand," Remus assured him. "At least I think that I do." He frowned, and then seemed to be debating something internally. He opened his mouth to speak, but closed almost as soon as he did, rethinking what he was going to say. "Harry...I doubt that Daphne would have let you come to school without knowing who I am...that I was one of James' good friends."

Harry smirked, "She also mentioned that you dated."

Remus blushed. "Yes...well, um...I'll take that as a yes...and it wasn't *really* a date. You see..."

Harry smiled, throwing his hands up. "Spare me the details, *please*...but go on..."

Remus appeared completely thrown off balance by Harry's comment about his relationship with Daphne, but Harry was sure that he was just as happy to be discussing a much lighter topic. "Yes, well...I feel like I really should get to know you...if you don't mind... I don't know," he said, stumbling over his words even more. "Look, Harry, if you're interested, I'd like to talk with you a bit this year...outside of class."

Harry nodded slowly. "I'm not against it," he admitted. "Should a teacher such as yourself be pursuing a relationship like that with a student, no matter who he is?" Harry asked slowly, testing Remus. He wanted to know more about why Remus was so intent on being close to him. He didn't believe that it was merely a favor to his father. Remus was hiding something, probably not even by intent, but there was something about his request that he wasn't telling Harry.

"Technically, no," Remus said. "But unless you plan to report it, I don't think that would be a problem...can you at least *think* about it?" he asked. Harry was surprised by the desperation and anxiety in his voice. *What does he want from me?*

Harry knew a way to completely throw his professor off balance. It wasn't a particularly kind thing to do, but something made him uneasy

about Remus. As he opened his mouth to speak, something rapped on the window. Remus jumped, and Harry saw a very familiar-looking owl with a package tied to his leg. Remus quickly untied the package, scrawled a quick note, and flung Yancy out the window. Remus turned back to him, looking anxious. Harry smiled at him, and he cringed noticeably. “You are probably expecting me to ask what exactly Daphne’s owl is doing delivering things to you, aren’t you?” Harry asked him.

“Well, yes, I rather was,” Remus admitted. “I suppose Daphne told you she’d be sending me something, then?” He looked hopeful at the possibility that that was all that Daphne had told him.

“She told me she’d be sending you a potion for your ‘furry little problem,’” Harry said, with an expression of false puzzlement. Remus glared at him, and Harry knew that he had tired of this game.

“You know, don’t you? Don’t play games with me, Harry,” Remus warned. “I should have suspected it. I don’t think Daphne would have allowed you to come not knowing what I was.” He paused, and gave Harry a stern glare that made him feel more than a little guilty for taunting the man about something that obviously mattered a great deal to him. “Tell me: What am I?”

“You’re a werewolf,” Harry said. “Yes, Daphne told me. She making Wolfsbane Potion for you at her request; she’d much rather brew it herself than trust Snape with your well-being.”

Remus frowned. “Do you know *why* Snape hates me so much? And presumably, if I know him at all, *you* as well?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “Though he’s treated me much better of late. I’m one of his Slytherins; he’s our Head of House. It took awhile, but he’s finally figured out that I am nothing like my father.” To his surprise, Remus flinched.

Harry glared at him, a bit of frustration bursting through. He’d hoped that Remus might understand. He supposed he could understand why friends of James or Lily found it surprising that he’d been Sorted into Slytherin. But one thing he despised was when people acted as if he’d somehow *dirtied* the Potter name. “How do you feel about that,

Remus?" Harry asked in a dangerously soft voice. It was *not* the appropriate tone to use with a professor, but in this situation, his professor had initiated the more informal conversation. At this moment, Remus was not a professor, and Harry was not a student. They were equals in this conversation, or nearly so.

"About *what*, Harry?" Remus replied, obviously uncomfortable at being asked in that way.

Harry resisted the urge to snarl at him, trying to fight back his emotions and resist the urge to scream at the man. His Slytherin instincts and cunning had been thrown to the side, and he was trying to recover them. He didn't mind getting emotional at times...well, he didn't *like* it, but he certainly didn't find it exceedingly uncomfortable. On the other hand, he loathed uncontrolled anger. "You know *exactly* what I mean, Remus," Harry said, sounding a great deal like Snape. "Are you *baffled*? Can you not understand how it is *possible* that the son of the great *Gryffindor*, James Potter, and the fair *Gryffindor*, Lily Evans, produced a sneaky, cunning, underhanded *Slytherin* son?"

Remus looked absolutely flabbergasted. "I..."

"Save it," Harry snarled. "If you want to talk to me, Remus, than speak to *me*. I am not a vessel through which you can communicate with your long dead best friend. I am my own person."

Remus stood up, clearly angry. His eyes flashed amber, probably as a result of Harry insulting his parents. "Harry," he began relatively calmly, though his voice shook somewhat. "I most *certainly* do not feel *anything* of the sort. And I must wonder why you assumed that I *did*."

Harry's pulse pounded in his head. *The idiot...* "You have no *idea* what I went through because of *this*," he said, throwing the Slytherin Badge on the desk. It clattered on the hard surface, skidding across the top of the desk before hitting a pile of papers on Remus's side "People hated me, feared me, avoided me. I had precious few I could trust, and most of my suffering was caused by *Gryffindors* who were just about as stupid, arrogant, ignorant, and shallow as my *father* was."

Remus paled. "Who told you that? What *has* Daphne told you about James?" He was clearly in shock, almost sounding frightened.

"What, just realizing that he wasn't *perfect*?" Harry snapped. "That he was more of an arrogant git and a bully than some valiant, virtuous *Gryffindor*? I would have thought that you might have figured out that his pranks went a bit *too far* sometimes..."

Remus opened his mouth to speak, then stopped, taking several deep, calming breaths. "James...and the rest of us...were most certainly not *perfect*. Some of things he did to Severus were *appalling*. Sirius wasn't any better. Peter...Peter just played along, followed James around like a lost puppy." He paused. "And I...I just played along too. They were my friends, and I felt the need to approve of their behavior. Dumbledore gave me a Prefect's badge to control them, and I did nothing of the sort. I know that now." He looked deep into Harry's eyes. "But for Merlin's sake, Harry, for a moment I thought I was speaking to *Snape*! Why are you so...*bitter*?"

"My first year was *hell*, Remus" Harry said softly. "For months, I had no one but myself. I made a friend, and then her entire house turned against her because of it."

"Hermione?" Remus asked. Harry nodded. "I think I understand a bit-

"That isn't everything," Harry continued, his voice sharp and biting. "I didn't just *make friends* with Hermione. I had to *save her life* by nearly getting *killed* by a troll." Remus inhaled sharply, but Harry plowed on. "Then, the two of us saved the bloody school by stopping Voldemort from obtaining the Philosopher's Stone. I wasn't *trying* to be a *hero*. I wasn't trying to be a *Gryffindor*. I was trying to do what Slytherins do best: *survive*. And in the process, Hermione and I nearly died...*twice*..."

"So, you see Remus," Harry finished. "I'm not very fond of Gryffindors. Because not only did I nearly lose my life to cover a *misjudgment* by Dumbledore, the greatest Gryffindor of them all, but he robbed my House of the House Cup by giving unjust points to the same student who has made it his mission to slander my name in every *possible* way while making his sister absolutely miserable, Ron Weasley."

Remus shook his head, trying to understand. There was long, deafening silence. "I had no idea...I think I understand where you are coming from now," he said, swallowing thickly. "I'm sorry. I really don't think any *less* of you being a Slytherin...We had a rather terrible batch of them; they nearly all became Death Eaters or spouses of them. I don't think you'd be anything like that, and it has nothing to do with my opinion of your parents. I *don't* know much about you, but I want to." He paused. "You see, Harry, I see a lot of myself in you...Yes, I had James, Peter, and...Sirius," he said, nearly choking on the name of his former friend. "But I was alone for several months. No one wanted to speak to me...but it was different in that it wasn't that they shunned me for what I was; they didn't know..."

"You still didn't believe that you belonged," Harry finished, understanding where Remus was coming from. "Not only *that*, but you were *frightened* of making friends only to lose them when they found out what you were."

Remus stared at Harry with an entirely new respect in his eyes. "Yes, Harry. That's *exactly* what it was like. I realize that for you it was more of the complete opposite, but I still can relate."

Harry looked at his professor for a moment. "I'm sorry," he finally said. "I shouldn't have *attacked* you like that. And I don't *hate* my father..."

"You might have," Remus said softly. "I understand that now. You are...well, the kind of person he would have harassed, belittled, embarrassed and pranked just to show off, to prove that he was better. You were vulnerable."

Harry nodded. It was clear that they had reached a deep understanding. "Remus, I'm willing to give you a chance. And I think we have a much better chance of having a positive relationship now that you have a better idea of what I'm like. But please, leave James out of it. As fine a man as he may have been after he matured, he was hardly a role model before that."

Remus looked torn. "I must admit, it's rather strange to meet a child who has such an adult perspective on their father...though I fear you leave out some of the positive aspects of James' personality."

"It's rather simple, really," Harry said. "I never knew him. Daphne is the only parent I've ever known. What can a handful of childhood memories teach me about who my father really was? I've heard that he was brave, that he was a caring and loving man. And Daphne believes that once he stepped back and realized how utterly *stupid* he had been, that he was all of those things. And to be perfectly honest, Daphne was there; I wasn't. I trust what she tells me."

"Perhaps it would be a good thing to have another opinion, then. I'm sure Daphne may have left out quite a few...*unflattering* things about Lily."

Harry shook his head. Remus didn't understand at all, not that he blamed him; it was impossible to comprehend Daphne's behavior at times. "Daphne has told me almost *nothing* about my mother. It's too painful for her."

Remus looked thoughtful, but grave. "I suppose that makes sense," he said quietly. "She's gone through quite a lot in her life." Harry knew from the way Remus spoke of Daphne that he was hiding something. There was something about Daphne, or at least, about the way he thought of her, that he was not telling Harry. *I suppose he'll tell me in time if it's important. But I don't plan to forget it.*

"She has," Harry admitted. He wanted to add 'and so have I,' but decided against it. "She still won't look me in the eyes when she talks about Lily. I understand why, of course. It's nothing personal."

Remus simply nodded. The bell to end lunch rang. "Are you going to be alright? I can certainly get you out of your afternoon class. I *insist* that you at least eat something."

"I need to find Hermione," Harry said. "Merlin knows where she ran off to, and she was in bad shape when she left. The Boggart...well, I don't think either one of us was expecting *that...*"

Remus nodded grimly. "I'm sure. What class do you have?"

"Care of Magical Creatures," Harry answered.

Remus smiled. "Good. It shouldn't be difficult to explain this to Rubeus. I'm sure he won't mind."

Harry stopped. "Hagrid? What does he have to do with this?" Last Harry had checked, the Care of Magical Creatures professor had been Lawrence Kettleburn, a middle-aged man whom Daphne described as 'easily excitable and rattled, yet completely in love with anything living.' He'd apparently first taken the job when Daphne was attending school.

Remus chuckled. "You didn't hear? Professor Hagrid is teaching the class now. I daresay he's quite thrilled."

"I can only imagine," Harry replied smiling. "Good on him." He paused, gathering his thoughts. "Alright, I'll go look for Hermione."

"And I'll talk to Hagrid at dinner. I've got to make up lesson plans. Go find your friend, Harry."

Harry smiled and left. As his footsteps echoed down the hallway, he didn't see Remus slowly turn and wander back into his office. He didn't see him dig through his battered suitcase. He didn't see him pull out a single photograph, blow the dust off of it, and stare hard at it, tears forming in his eyes. The photograph depicted a young married couple. One, a redhead with emerald green eyes, the other, a tall man with messy jet-black hair and a beaming grin as he wrapped his arms around his wife. In her arms was two-month old infant, a tuft of black hair barely visible. His eyes were squeezed shut, but Remus knew that when he was awake, his green eyes shone as brightly as his mother's did.

He put the photograph down, but the image of the sweet, innocent baby that Lily and James Potter had brought into the world remained seared into his mind's eye. He wandered over to his office window that overlooked the grounds. As he stared out over the hilly landscape, he swore angrily. "What have you done to him, Daphne?"

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Harry's search for Hermione came to an abrupt end when his bushy-haired best friend collided with him as both of them rounded a corner on the Fourth Floor corridor.

“Harry?”

“Hermione?”

They both picked themselves up. Hermione was blushing madly, and Harry felt that his cheeks were warm as well. Harry could immediately tell that Hermione was itching to tell him something. She was practically bouncing on the balls of her feet, and her brown eyes were lit with curiosity and glee. The red circles around her eyes had faded until they were almost invisible. Something had happened to change her mindset completely.

Harry frowned at her. “What’s going on?” he asked. He would have guessed she would have been depressed, embarrassed, or exhausted, but he certainly didn’t expect her to be this excited.

“You won’t *believe* what I found!” she continued. “I’ve never seen or read about anything like it.” Harry immediately knew that it really was something special. Harry read a lot, but even he couldn’t surpass Hermione. She also had an amazing memory and ability to condense astounding amounts of information. So when she claimed she’d never heard or seen anything like it, one took something like that seriously.

“Hermione, calm down. What did you find?”

She frowned slightly. “Well, I didn’t find it...actually, a house-elf did. By the name of Dobby...who says he knows you...” Abruptly, her expression changed to a half-hearted glare. “Why would you own *another* house-elf? An elf that I believe was *freed* last year?”

Harry winced. “He needed somewhere to go...and we are paying him. Daphne sent him to Hogwarts to ostensibly work here and keep an eye on things...more likely, he’s here to keep an eye on *me*.”

“Well, anyway, I was looking for somewhere to...have a good cry,” she said softly, slightly embarrassed. “And Dobby found me and told me that he knew a place that I’d like...oh Harry it was incredible! There’s this room on the Seventh Floor...”

“Hold on,” Harry said, throwing up his hands. “We went through the entire Seventh Floor when we were searching for a new place to

practice spells. We *definitely* did not just *miss* an entire room. Maybe a broom closet, but not a room of any meaningful size..."

"Yes, we *did*," Hermione insisted. "Because it isn't *there* normally...Dobby called it "the come-and-go room," or something like that. Apparently, if you really need something, you need to walk by this blank wall three times and a door appears. Once you go inside, *anything* you want, the room will provide."

Harry gave her a skeptical look. "*Anything*? Don't you think in the thousands of years of Hogwarts history someone would have found and reported a room that could magically provide *anything* a person desired?"

Hermione looked angry. "Oh, *you*," she growled. Suddenly, she yanked him forward by the sleeve of his robes, and Harry found himself being dragged through the castle, up multiple flights of stairs. He decided to stop resisting and simply follow her to whatever it was that he wanted to show her. They arrived at a blank wall with Hermione panting, almost out of breath. "Harry, walk by the wall three times, and think of some kind of room you want right now."

"What?"

Hermione glared at him. "Think, 'I want a training room to practice spells' and walk past that wall three times...just do it!" she practically screeched at him.

"Alright!" Harry told her, raising his hands. He did as she asked, trying not to let his doubts slip into his thoughts. He had a feeling that might prevent...whatever it was from happening.

*I need a place to practice advanced spellwork. I need a place to practice advanced spellwork. I need a place to practice advanced spellwork...*

Following the third pass, Harry watched, open-mouthed, as a carved wooden door abruptly materialized in the middle of the stone wall. He quickly walked over to it and yanked it open. The sight that met him was incredible.

It was as if Daphne's training facility had been relocated to Hogwarts, but with a few additions. Harry could see the familiar target range, the large bookcases of combat magic compendiums, the padded walls and flooring where Daphne practiced dodges and put herself through grueling fire-and-maneuver drills, where she dove, dodged, did anything she could to avoid barrages of stinging hexes fired from magically-powered target drones of her own design. She told him that Lily had actually been the one to figure out the correct combination of charms to animate them. Harry also saw a duplicate of the power meter Daphne used to evaluate the energy of her various spells. Most of the equipment was the same as that used by the Auror school.

"Wow..." Harry whispered.

"I *told* you," Hermione said. "You didn't want to believe me. Watch this." Harry glanced back and saw her eyes narrow. Abruptly, a copy of *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* appeared on a table. Harry walked over and picked up the book. It was real.

"This is incredible," Harry said softly.

"I know," Hermione said. "Think of the possibilities." Harry was. Beyond simply a new place to train, they had access to any book on any subject, specialized equipment, complete privacy...

"It's not just about training, either," Hermione said, as if reading Harry's thoughts. If we need a place to be alone, it's here. If you need to hold a private meeting, it won't be a problem."

"You aren't thinking about telling a teacher, are you?" Harry asked. "Because I think we and the House-Elves are the only ones that know about this place. And in all likelihood, if the house-elves know, so does Dumbledore. He'll make sure that it isn't a danger of any kind. Snape and McGonagall don't need to know."

"I guess that makes sense," Hermione said. "Obviously, we'll tell Ginny." She grimaced. "And *Blaise*," she groaned.

Harry looked her in the eyes. "Why is it that you hate him so much? I understand that you don't appreciate some of his beliefs, but as purebloods and Slytherins go, he's a pretty decent bloke."

"I know that," Hermione snapped back. "But he...never mind."

Harry wasn't going to let her get away with that. "What? Why don't you like him?"

"Because....because I don't think that he really likes you as a *friend*. He just wants to be close to you because of who you are. And because when you are around him, all you think about are these Slytherin power games. You're *different* when you are around him, and I don't *like* that," Hermione said softly. "Look, I understand that you feel you have to make a difference in the future. I don't know if I agree with your reasoning, and I don't like you acting so...*mature*. It's like you've aged ten years over the summer. You aren't behaving like a *thirteen-year old*, normal or not."

"Maybe I *have* changed," Harry admitted. "You have a problem with that?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. I really care about you Harry, and I'll follow you in whatever you want to do. That doesn't mean that I have to *like* it."

"That's your prerogative," Harry replied. "I'm not going to *force* you to think one way or another...but we've got to figure out a way to do this without you fighting me, actively or passively, for this entire year. Ginny isn't happy with me either."

"No, I don't think she is," Hermione said. "I haven't spoken with her since last night, but from what I saw on the train, she isn't thrilled with the way you've been behaving."

Harry sighed. "Well, I'll try to cut back on it, then. It's probably better than I'm more relaxed anyway."

"You've entered a field that I know nothing about, a field that I'm not particularly interested in learning," Hermione cautioned him. She sighed. "We need to get to class. I think it's Care of Magical Creatures. I heard that Hagrid has been made a Professor; I think it was announced when we were with Madam Pomfrey...that reminds me: did you write to Daphne about the Dementors?"

Harry shook his head. The thought hadn't occurred to him. "I suppose I should. She'll probably have some advice. I know that the only way to fight Dementors is called the Patronus Charm, but I don't know much about it."

Hermione smiled. "Well, we are in the Room of Requirement."

"The what?"

"Dobby said this room is also called 'The Room of Requirement,'" Hermione explained. "Oh, there's one other thing about this room, we can't bring anything the room provides us with outside, except for things like food. If we eat food the Room provides, it stays in our stomachs. But books, devices, anything like that isn't allowed outside."

"That's disappointing," Harry admitted. He checked his watch. "We should try to catch Ginny and bring her up here, then get down to dinner," he said.

Hermione nodded and left. Harry lingered for only a moment, wondering how he was going to juggle his responsibilities to find allies and cultivate relationships with other students and what Hermione seemed to think of as 'his duty to enjoy himself.'

It wasn't going to be easy.

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They'd found Ginny already sitting with Anne Grunitch and Melissa Quinn at the Slytherin table. Hermione had decided to catch up with Padma Patil and Mandy Brocklehurst. Harry had stopped by the Ravenclaw Table briefly, if only to judge the reactions of Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot to his presence. Both had been victims of the Basilisk's indirect glare the previous year.

Lisa, to his relief, didn't seem to blame him in the slightest. She greeted him brightly, and even invited him to sit next to her. Terry was a bit more business-like, but it didn't seem as if he blamed Harry, or thought differently of him. The dark-haired boy seemed conflicted, as if he didn't really trust Harry, but still didn't believe that Harry was anything more than an innocent victim. For that reason and others,

Harry decided to sit with Ginny and the Slytherins. Another reason was that Luna Lovegood was staring at him. The girl simply *unnerved* him in a way that no one else could. Her ability to sense his thoughts and deceive his mind frightened him in a way, yet he felt a strange connection to her that made it impossible for him to truly dislike her. Perhaps it was that she too had been harassed by her housemates during her first year, but Harry suspected it was something deeper, potentially more sinister than that.

Ginny seemed pleased to see him. Harry was somewhat grateful to get away from Hermione. Her stare had the capacity to make him feel guilty, and he could already feel his duties pulling him in opposite directions.

Harry spent dinner talking to Ginny's housemates, trying to learn a bit about them. Ginny seemed to be very cheerful and energetic around them. Harry was happy for her in that regard. He certainly wanted her to spend a great deal of time with him and Hermione, but he felt that she was far too dependent on them at times. Likewise, he got the sense that she didn't feel like she belonged with them. Her crisis of confidence over the summer, in which she had basically told Harry that she wanted to receive less help from the two of them and do more on her own, had more or less confirmed all of that.

Still, in about an hour of conversation, Harry quickly grew to like both of the girls. Anne Grunitch was, in one word, tough. Physically, she was tall, well-built, sharp featured with dark brown hair and hard hazel eyes. She was well spoken and intelligent, but if Harry had to describe her personality, 'bulldog' was the word that came to mind. In conversation, she would listen briefly before making her views on the subject known, loud and clear. Harry thought she was a great deal like Millicent Bulstrode, though without the arrogance that came with a pampered pureblood upbringing. Anne's parents were both wizards, but they weren't enormously wealthy, and while they respected pureblood traditions, they both worked rather unremarkable jobs in the Ministry. Anne's mother, Julia, worked in the Improper Use of Magic Office, while her father, Henry, was an aide to Rufus Scrimgeour, the Head of the Auror Office.

Harry had not introduced the subject of the occupations of the participants' parents; Ginny had. Harry wasn't sure how wise it was to advertise that her father worked in the openly mocked Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department in a conversation with pureblooded Slytherins, but even Anne simply nodded, not offering an opinion either way.

Melissa Quinn was different than Anne in almost every way. Blond-haired and blue-eyed, she was extremely cheerful and quite warm and welcoming. She had a good sense of humor and seemed to inject life into the conversation by her very presence. She was a half-blood like Harry, with a Muggleborn father and pureblood mother. She did not advertise the fact, wisely choosing to reveal it only when it was clear that this group did not possess the prejudices that many Slytherins had. Melissa was neither extraordinarily intelligent nor did she appear foolish. She seemed very good at judging situations, analyzing what to do or say at certain moments. It was a skill that Harry thought should serve her well.

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"Potter."

The voice came from the shadows, and was spoken in a tone equal parts request and demand. Harry was alone, walking through the dungeons after a trip to the Owlery. He'd sent Hedwig off to his guardian with a letter that mostly involved his reaction to the Dementors. He was interested to see what Daphne's response would be. He had yet to find time to research the Patronus Charm, the only method he knew of for defeating Dementors. It was *not* possible to kill a Dementor; at least, there was no record of it ever being accomplished. Magic was unlimited in its scope and uses, and often, things described as impossible could be made possible by a combination of determination, power, and skill.

Ginny and Hermione at the moment were spending time together in the library. Ginny's marks had slipped as a result of her lack of help from Harry and Hermione, and she'd finally decided to ask for assistance. She didn't want Hermione to show her how to do the assignments; she was hoping that Hermione might teach her general strategies and methods to help her complete her more difficult

assignments. Hermione, of course, was more than willing. They would probably be in the library the entire day. As for Blaise, Harry had not seen him since their last Herbology Class, when he'd partnered with the Slytherin and Susan Bones on a difficult assignment involving Indian Fire Breathers. The plants when fully grown were like botanical dragons, albeit immobile, shooting flames up to five meters. The plants they were dealing with were immature and only capable of throwing sparks and small flames, though quite a few students were burned. Their task was to trim their leaves, water them, and then repot them. Susan did most of the physical work while Harry assisted her and Blaise served as a lookout for sparks and did things like water the plants while Harry and Susan put their limbs on the line by holding down the Fire Breathers. Blaise wasn't one to risk life and limb in a Herbology Class. Neither was Harry, for that matter, but he was forced to by circumstance, while Susan was not so unwilling.

Lost in his thoughts as he was, he jumped slightly when he was so abruptly addressed. He glanced around, muscles tightening. He cocked his wrist and gave it a flick, shooting his wand into his right hand.

"That really *isn't* necessary, Potter," the voice drawled. Harry recognized it now. He turned around in time to see Draco Malfoy step out of the shadows. The dungeons were lit by only evenly spaced torches, so a great deal of the space was dark. The first thing that Harry observed was that Draco was unarmed. His wand was presumably in his pocket, and his hands were out in front of him, clearly empty. The second and most notable thing that Harry recognized was that the Malfoy Heir was alone. Crabbe and Goyle were nowhere to be found. This was quite unusual; the two were probably instructed by their fathers not to let Lucius's son out of their sight. They provided muscle and intimidation more than actual protection: neither Greg nor Vince was overly intelligent or magically talented. They also served to feed Draco's ego. Harry had brawled with them before, and they made do with brute strength than technique. *Whatever works*, Harry thought.

"I suppose not," Harry said, smoothly sliding the wand back into the holster. "But one must always be prepared...especially a person with a convicted murderer after them."

"One you are rather *familiar* with, I daresay," Draco taunted. "One might say you two are *related*." Draco's statement served two ends. First, if Harry was unaware that Sirius Black was his godfather, the revelation would knock Harry off balance, giving the blond-haired boy a clear advantage. Harry's thoughts would be confused, his demeanor distracted. Second, even if Harry was aware of the connection, he assumed correctly that Harry was not comfortable with the fact. Either way, he'd struck a subtle first blow."

"Not by blood," Harry pointed out. He smiled rather viciously. "Which is more than I can say for you." Draco's mother Narcissa was Sirius's cousin. Black had a brother, a Death Eater who'd apparently tried to leave the Dark Lord's service and had vanished a month before the fall of Voldemort.

"Black was disowned by his parents when he was teenager," Draco replied. "He did not wish to follow his parent's wishes. He tested their patience, and they cut him off." He smiled nastily. "Do you know where he went after that?"

Harry didn't. But he wasn't stupid, and decided to make an educated guess. *If Draco is trying to imply that Black is family, there is only one place he could have gone. After all, Daphne said the man was like his brother.* "I suppose my grandparents chose poorly. Then again, no one guessed he would join the Dark Lord. His reasons for betraying my parents are not of my concern."

"Perhaps," Draco said, his pale grey eyes hard with concentration. He'd appeared surprised by Harry's response, inadvertently telling his opponent that he'd guessed correctly. "But *that* is only one thing I feel that we need to discuss. *Alone*," he added.

Harry smiled. "I believe that we *are* alone, Draco. My friends are elsewhere, as are yours." It was a stretch to call Crabbe and Goyle Draco's friends, but it was the most accurate term that Harry could come up with. There were a number of reasons that Draco had chosen to seek out Harry. First, he might have been ordered to

confront the Boy-Who-Lived by his father, who was upset about the loss of face he'd suffered at the hands of Daphne. Second, he might have decided he needed to make a powerful impression on his rival. Harry counted this as the most likely, as Draco had obviously been practicing; his speech was more confident, more self-assured, slightly less arrogant, and more intelligent than it had been before. Perhaps this summer Lucius had finally begun the proper part of Draco's pureblood education. He'd come to Hogwarts far less mature than a number of his classmates, such as Nott and Daphne Greengrass.

The third possibility was that Draco wanted something. Not merely influence or a personal victory, but that he was honestly enlisting Harry's help in something. It didn't mean they had to be friends, or even that they had to like each other. It was like how Harry had served as Nott's partner the day that Greengrass had taken ill: Nott needed a partner on par with Daphne's ability and skill, Harry was interested in learning from the more experienced boy.

"Yes, well..." Draco stuttered, breaking his mask of cold indifference and his composure. *Strike one.* "...I believe we have things to discuss."

Harry countered Draco's expression, appearing casually interested, but obviously in need of something more to remain intrigued. He was putting the onus on Draco to explain what he wanted, forcing him into the first move. Harry was extremely interested in what the boy had to say, but that didn't mean he had to tell Draco that. He waited. Draco said nothing.

Harry finally broke the silence with a challenge, a technique that still forced Draco into action, yet increased the pressure upon him. "If you've come with a warning or a threat from your father, I daresay you'd best spit it out before you lose me. I was on the way to the Common Room to speak with Blaise Zabini. He's waiting for me."

That was a lie, but Draco didn't know that. And that was why it was such a successful tactic. Harry had countered Draco's initial thrust, and was forcing the other boy onto the defensive. Now he was winning.

"Father is quite unhappy with you and your guardian," Draco said, finally gathering his composure. "He's considered legal action."

Harry resisted the urge to snort. "Your father endangered my life and the lives of many students. The services of an over-enthusiastic house-elf are a small price to pay. Lucius has no case."

Draco frowned, then smiled. His expression grew confident, almost arrogant. It also sent a chill down Harry's spine. *He knows something. He knows something that he assumed I know but that I just proved that I didn't. At least he's guessing that I don't.*

"I'm surprised, Potter," Draco said, his tone that of a hunter stalking prey. Prey that had just cut it self on a sharp rock and was now bleeding. He closed for the kill. "Doesn't your guardian tell you *everything*? I suppose she didn't. Perhaps she's ashamed, thought I doubt it...or perhaps she's realized how stupid what she did was."

Harry felt beads of cold sweat on his forehead. A slight fear, a fear of the unknown, had abruptly leapt onto him, freezing his thoughts and motions. Draco *definitely* knew something. Something that Daphne had done that Harry was certain he *didn't* want to know about.

"You're bluffing," Harry said with as much confidence as he could muster. If he was correct, he should effectively blunt Draco's attack. If not...

"No, I'm not," Draco said. His smile was that of a person who'd struck gold, found the perfect weakness to knock the Boy-Who-Lived off kilter, to shatter his world as he knew it. Harry could only hope that the young Malfoy was overplaying his hand out of inexperience.

"Did Dressler mention to you that she swore a Vow of Vengeance against Father and me?" Harry felt his blood run cold. Draco grinned wider. "Apparently not. You know what that means of course: she demanded compensation, in the form of Dobby, but also that should Father attempt to harm you further, *I will die*. It's a rather risky ritual, really. One she apparently didn't think enough about...is it *that* hard to imagine that your beloved Grey Maiden could swear to kill a *child*, Potter? Even one as dangerous as me?"

He was gloating now, but that hardly mattered. Harry had fallen right into his trap, even if Malfoy hadn't even been aware that he was laying it. He didn't want to believe it, but he couldn't honestly say he thought Draco was lying. He *wanted* to believe it, but that wasn't the same thing. Daphne was not rational when it came to defending Harry, her only remaining family. *But how could she be so coldhearted? I realize that Draco is the son of a Death Eater and will be dangerous in the future, but at this point in his life he's more innocent than I am! She could just stand there and swear that if Lucius harms a hair on my head that she will hunt down and kill them both?*

*How could you, Daphne? How could you stand there and swear to kill two people in my name?*

*She could be sent to Azkaban at the very least. The world would be down a Death Eater and a Dark Pureblood Heir, but at what price? Where would I go? Would I even still be alive?*

It didn't stop there, of course. A Vow of Vengeance was one of those rituals that actually involved far more people than was originally intended. Because if Draco or Lucius was murdered, Narcissa Malfoy, under the Old Laws of Pureblood Society, could either challenge Daphne to a duel or seek prosecution. She didn't even have to be the participant in the duel; she could contract someone such as Draco's godfather, Snape, to fight for her. She could charge Daphne with murder and have her tried in front of the Wizengamot; the strange thing about a Vow of Vengeance was that while its casting was technically legal, the execution was not. *And Merlin knows how many skeletons Daphne has buried in her closet...*

"Speechless, Potter?" Draco taunted. "Can't believe it?"

Harry fixed his eyes on his rival. "I *can* believe it. I *cannot* believe that she could be that stupid."

Draco's eyes lit up. "So you've done some research, Potter? Quite surprising that a *half-blood* like you would know the intricacies of a *pureblood* tradition. It's quite a disgrace that Dressler didn't at least teach you some of the basics...but I suppose *her* family is *defunct*, and the Dresslers were always a *disgrace* to Pureblood society. The

only thing that separated them from the Weasleys was that they were actually *wealthy*."

"I know the consequences, Malfoy," Harry snapped, losing his composure. Draco had already won this duel, simply by pure good fortune on his part. *And a monumental misjudgment by Daphne...*

"Do you?" Draco asked. "So you know that Mother could have your guardian thrown into Azkaban or executed? You know that Dressler is sworn on her magic to kill both myself and father or she will forfeit the magic she received as the O'Connor Magical Heir? You know that even if Dressler is dead or in Azkaban, Father could kill you and get away with it?"

Harry froze. "*What?*" This last revelation was beginning to make him question Daphne's sanity. *She'd never do that. She'd never put my life in jeopardy for the sake of revenge. She knows that the Malfoys rely on evading the law to continue their prosperity. She'd never give them a legal way to harm me, let alone kill me...*

"It's *complicated*, of course," Draco drawled. "But if all the Old Laws were in play, and Daphne kills me, the Malfoy Magical Heir, then my family is within its rights to kill Daphne's Magical Heir in retribution."

"She's childless," Harry protested. "I'm related to her only by about sixty families on my father's side."

"As are we all," Draco replied. "That's irrelevant. As her ward, *you* are the most *likely* candidate to be named the Dressler/O'Connor Magical Heir; whether that is her intention or not, it doesn't matter. Either way, you are in effect, her son."

"If all three of you are dead..."

"Well, *technically*, it would be the responsibility of Bellatrix Lestrange, my aunt, to avenge my death. Black and Tonks had been disowned, and I'll eat my mattress before *Andromeda* harms you." He spat the name of his disowned aunt. "Bella is in Azkaban, and charged with torture and murder, but she couldn't be charged with your murder, not that it would matter. Actually, Father is gambling that one of us will still be alive."

Harry was speechless, utterly and totally speechless.

"There would be a trial, of course," Draco continued, pressing his advantage. "But between Father's wealth, influence, friends and the Old Laws, whoever killed you would undoubtedly get off...I'm counting that Daphne is already dead or in Azkaban, of course."

Harry nodded dumbly.

"Still sure you know you guardian, Potter? Do you really understand now everything she's capable of? Do you even know her *past*? Father reckons that if you reversed the titles of Aunt Bella and Dressler, your guardian would be in Azkaban or dead. She was as inhuman as the worst Death Eater, except that she was an *Auror*." He whined the word mockingly as if he thought it was a poor excuse. "There are dozens of people who want her dead, who believe she's a psychopathic murderer. I'm sure *you* can't deny they have a case."

Harry stared at him, and Draco shook his head as if disciplining a young child. "It's not that hard to figure out what happened down there." He began ticking things off his fingers. "Potions used to treat the Cruciatus, Mind Healing Potions...I doubt the *Diary* did that to you. There was only one person down there that was capable of doing that kind of thing. Daphne Artemis Dressler." He spoke each part of her name slowly, as if savoring the pain that they brought to his stunned rival.

Harry felt absolutely exhausted. He felt betrayed, confused, angry, horrified, and mournful. Draco had hit him where it hurt the most, and his bitterness and hatred of his guardian for making him go through the ordeal of mental and physical agony that he'd undergone returned with a vengeance.

"I think we're finished, Potter. I daresay I've left you with a few things to think about." Draco walked away, standing tall and proud, knowing he'd scored a tremendous victory over the Boy-Who-Lived.

And Harry collapsed against the near wall, trying to fight back the tears of frustration and anger at Daphne's horrific stupidity. He needed Ginny. He needed Hermione. He needed someone to talk to;

someone to tell him it would be alright, because he wasn't sure he believed it at the moment.

*How could you do this, Daphne? How could you?*

---

It was not *possible*.

He couldn't believe what he had just seen. He didn't want to believe what he had just seen. *Twelve years in Azkaban must have messed with my head more than I thought. I did not just see that. I've got to be mental or dreaming...or both.*

Sirius Black, transformed as Padfoot, snuck back into the large hole in one of the creaky, rotted wooden walls of the Shrieking Shack. As soon as he was through, he transformed back into a man, a skeleton-like man whose near-translucent skin was stretched tightly over his bones, muscles only now slowly rebuilding themselves. There hadn't been many opportunities to run around a lot at Azkaban, and his muscles had atrophied down to almost nothing. The trek to Hogwarts he could never have completed in human form. Only as a dog, and even then, it was grueling. He'd survived on a diet of rainwater and rodents, only once risking a raid on some Muggle's trashcan. He'd found a half-eaten chicken, which had smelled and tasted like a sumptuous feast compared to the thin gruel of Azkaban and the rats he'd eaten since then.

He'd come into the Grounds via the Forbidden Forest. Needless to say, the centaurs had *not* been happy to see him, and one, called Firenze, had even recommended reporting his presence to Dumbledore. But Bane, the leader of the herd, had overruled them. Grudgingly, Bane had agreed to give Sirius free reign of the Forest to hide and to hunt in.

Bane's debt to him dated back to when he was fourteen years old, and had gone into the Forest as part of one of James's dares. He'd been just about to leave when he'd encountered a wounded young centaur caught in a trap by a pair of Acromantulas. They had dug a hole, filed it with their webs, which had the strength of stone once they hardened, and covered it with debris. The young, inexperienced

centaur had fallen into the trap and was about to be converted into dinner by the equally young Acromantulas. Sirius had driven them off with a combination of Stinging Hexes, Blasting Hexes, and Stunning Spells.

Shortly after that, Bane's father had found both of them as Sirius tried to extricate the wounded centaur from the pit (his front legs were broken from the fall.) His father had made the wrong assumption, whacked Sirius around quite a bit, and shoved him up against a tree, aiming his bow at the fourteen-year old student's heart. Bane had finally explained to his father the true story, and once his father allowed Sirius to cut the webs and levitate Bane out of the hole, Bane explained that he knew owed Sirius a Life Debt, something taken very seriously by their kind. Sirius had been tempted to set loose a centaur herd on Snape, but had made the wise decision to simply accept his thanks and call on the Debt another day. Hence, Bane allowed him access to the Forest.

Neither the Dementors nor the Aurors could enter the Forest. The wards surrounding the Shrieking Shack recognized him, and allowed him entrance through the hidden escape, something that the Marauders had created in case an emergency were ever to arise.

And so it was that Sirius Orion Black slowly walked over to the weathered and scarred bed, and sat down, staring ahead with wide eyes. *It couldn't be. It simply couldn't be...*

*He'd been wandering around the edge of the Forest near Hagrid's hut, scouting out the terrain he already knew quite well, when he'd seen a lone figure walking down from the castle. He was obviously a student, dressed in standard black robes. He was looking down, obviously a bit depressed. If Sirius was correct, it was close to dinner; the sun was already setting over the lake. The student was probably trying to catch the Groundskeeper, Hagrid, before he went to the Great Hall.*

*As he drew closer, Sirius became intrigued. He couldn't see his hair or eye color yet, (though the former was either black or dark brown,) but something seemed familiar about him. Well hidden in a hollow of a tree just inside the Forest, Sirius stared out with Padfoot's eyes.*

*Fortunately, a dog animagus was not limited by a dog's black and white vision. He peered closer.*

*The boy continued down the path. As he approached, Sirius guessed he was in Third or Fourth Year, and a bit short at that. The boy was still looking down and away from Sirius, though he could now see the boy had glasses and black hair...very familiar black hair. Abruptly, he stopped. Glancing around, Sirius watched as he flicked his wrist slightly, and his wand appeared in his hand. Wrist holster? Sirius thought, that's odd for a kid his age.*

*Abruptly, he turned...and stared directly at the tree where Sirius was hiding. The light from the sunset hit him, and for an instant, Sirius got a very good look at him. His pulse quickened, then he ducked his head, withdrawing farther into the hollow. He could still see slightly, though he didn't think the kid could see him anymore. The student motioned as if to move off the path, but stopped. He raised his wand slightly, then shook his head, muttering something to himself. He continued down the path, walking up the stairs to Hagrid's front door. He raised his hand to knock, then stopped, glancing back as Sirius, who had moved farther forward, trying to confirm what he'd already seen. He did, but ducked back quickly as a boy that could only be Harry James Potter glanced back in his direction. Then he knocked on the door, and waited before it opened. As Hagrid let him in, he took one last glance at the hollow, then disappeared inside.*

*Sirius suddenly realized something else he'd seen. Something that simply didn't make any sense...*

It still didn't. But it had been there, clear as day. Shining proudly on the breast of James's only son had been his house badge. A green badge that depicted a grey serpent shaped like an 'S.'

*Harry is a Slytherin. Harry James Potter, the only son of Lily and James Potter, 1977 Gryffindor Head Girl and Boy, respectively, is a Slytherin.*

He couldn't understand how that could have happened. How could the apple have fallen *that* far from the tree? How could Harry, such a sweet, innocent baby when Sirius had seen him last, be a bloody Slytherin?

*Harry sleeps in the same room as future Death Eaters and Dark Wizards. He eats with them, talks with them and probably respects them! What did Daphne do to the kid? How could this have happened? Ravenclaw I could understand, Lily had a great mind...but SLYTHERIN!*

At that moment, Sirius knew he'd have to strike soon. He'd have to find Harry, and if he couldn't convince him to come, he'd have to abduct him and save him. He couldn't allow the son of James Potter, his godson, to become a Dark Wizard.

*I'll save you, Harry, he swore. Even if you don't think you need saving.*

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A/N: Another nice, angsty chapter. If there was a word I would have picked to describe this chapter, it would be 'provacative.'

In short, Remus isn't pleased by what he sees in Harry, the trio discovers the Room of Requirement two years early, Daphne 'the anti-Mary Sue' Dressler did something *incredibly* stupid, and Sirius gets a wakeup call as to the character of his Godson.

If Remus's reaction seemed a bit strong, it's mostly related to the fact that Harry treated Remus's lycanthropy a bit too lightly. He, unintentionally or not, taunted him with his knowledge. Harry's becoming a bit too into this role of sneaky, underhanded Slytherin. He's also quite bitter from his treatment by the Gryffindors. Remus has a decent chance of learning to accept him. Sirius..? You take a guess. I don't think Sirius is evil, by the way. I just don't think he's the saint that some author's depict him as.

I hope the Bane story sounded believable.

Speaking of which, if you find the pureblood revenge laws quite barbaric, well, they aren't that far off from the laws of the aristocracy in Medieval and Renaissance Europe. People fought and died in duels quite often. Lucius wouldn't just get to kill Harry, he'd get to duel him in avenging his son. And Harry would lose. Quite badly.

I'm not making Malfoy out as some kind of god, either. He's inexperienced, overly confident, and arrogant. He got lucky. Harry was schooling him before he blindly flailed around and struck gold. Harry gets bitten in this game of Slytherin oneupmanship. And Harry is bothered by the fact that Daphne would commit to killing twelve year old, even if it is Malfoy. Obviously, Daphne did something in the heat of the moment she's a bit ashamed of. How much does she know that she screwed up? You'll find out soon.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

## Chapter 10: Watch the Skies

"How are yeh, Harry?" Hagrid asked jovially, opening the door wide. Harry smiled weakly back at him, then glanced back in the direction he thought he'd seen something. All he saw now was a hollowed-out tree on the edge of the forest. He frowned slightly, then walked inside the hut. *I'm probably just imagining things.*

"I came to talk to you, Hagrid," Harry began. Then he faltered, his confidence had been badly shaken by Draco Malfoy's revelations about the Vow of Vengeance and the obviously unforeseen consequences of Daphne's action. Perhaps most shocking was the fact that Harry had been forced to discover the existence of the Vow through other sources. Daphne had explained how they had acquired Lucius Malfoy's elf, Dobby, when he had asked, but she had not mentioned any other kind of retaliation. *You'd think she'd mention a promise she had made to kill Lucius and Draco and potentially get herself thrown into Azkaban leaving me to fend for myself with my mother's relatives.*

He was acting under the assumption that Daphne did not think about the right of the Malfoys to challenge Harry to a duel to the death should Draco be killed in fulfilling the Vow.

Hagrid smiled encouragingly. *He can, Harry thought, until he finds out what's made me so rattled.* "I coulda guessed that, 'Arry. Yer a bit pale, and sweatin' a bit. Yer tough to upset, so I figured it had to be something bad that yeh needed to talk through with me."

Harry nodded. Sometimes, despite his appearance and speech, Hagrid could be quite observant and good at judging people and situations. "You see, Hagrid...Daphne did something rather stupid..."

The half-giant's dark eyes darkened slightly. "Well, I heard 'bout what she did to yeh down in the Chamber. She loves yeh, Harry. Yeh could see it in 'er eyes when she was watching yeh after the term ended. But she's far from perfect."

Harry sighed. "I know that. For years, I've always thought of her as some kind of perfect goddess, but now..."

Hagrid nodded. "I was just making a cuppa...yeh interested?" Harry nodded. "Well, yeh know, I'm like you in a lot o' ways. Never knew me mum, she was the giantess by the name of Fridiwulfa...gave up on me when she saw how small I was, probably. Dad took good care of me through, even though I was much bigger than 'im." Hagrid sniffled slightly. "Died in me 3rd Year," he said softly. "Same year I got expelled. Dumbledore took care of me, though. And like you, I thought ole Albus was the greatest man ever."

He got up and removed the boiling water from the stove, beginning to make tea. "He's a great wizard, 'Arry. He's real powerful, I can feel it in me bones. But 'e's not perfect. I started to see that last year, when yeh and 'Ermione ended up nearly dyin' going after the Stone...Shouldn'ta Dumbledore have protected yeh? Kept yeh safe?...and then there was the whole thing with the Forest...still don't know what it was that attacked yeh..."

"Quirrell," Harry said quietly. "It was Quirrell, drinking the unicorn blood for Voldemort...to keep him alive until he could obtain the Stone. That's how I drove him off, using my mother's protection. My scar burns when I'm near him."

Hagrid had nearly dropped the tea kettle on his foot when Harry said the Dark Lord's name, but managed to recover anyway.

"Don't say that name," he said gruffly. "I know yeh might think me a coward, but it gives me the collywobbles. Just can't stand teh hear it."

Harry nodded. "Sorry...but you get the picture."

Hagrid nodded. He finished making the tea and brought the kettle and a tray with teacups over to the table where Harry was sitting. Harry poured himself some of the scalding liquid and waited for it to cool down. Hagrid did the same. "I was real scared when I found yeh and 'Ermione lying there like that," Hagrid admitted. "Yeh were bleedin' all over the place, and I couldn't figure out what was wrong with yeh..."

"Magical exhaustion," Harry answered, taking a small sip of his tea. "Vol-You-Know-Who was able to drain Hermione's power and knock her unconscious. Then, the effort of using my mother's magic to drive him away knocked me out as well. I also think that You-Know-Who

might have done some damage to my magical core, damage that was repaired by Fawkes.”

Hagrid didn’t respond, staring at him for a moment. Then he shook his head.

“Yeh know, it scares me sometimes how grown up yeh act. Talking ‘bout death and getting hurt as if it was nothin’.” He looked deep into Harry’s eyes. “Yeh got ter take a step back, ‘Arry, look at it from the perspective of other people. I know that yer used to having yer life threatened, and that’s sad. But I hope yeh can understand when people are alarmed by how lightly yeh take things like what happened in the Forest.”

“I do realize how lucky I’ve been, Hagrid,” Harry said gravely. “I simply don’t have time to be terrified by the past. I’m going to try to stay out of the way of Sirius Black, and hopefully, I’ll stay safe this year.”

Hagrid took a long sip of his tea, staring hard at Harry. “It’s funny, ‘Arry. I can’t see *either* of yer parents in yeh sometimes. Yer too serious fer James, yer too unemotional for Lily.”

“How about Daphne?” Harry asked evenly.

“Well, there’s that,” Hagrid admitted. “Yeh are a lot like her. A bit *too* much, if yeh get my meanin’.”

“I don’t,” Harry replied.

“Well, Daphne’s different. She went through so much in the First War...it’s remarkable how yeh two get along. Most thought she’d been lost fer good, it was rather shockin’ to see yeh come back ten years later as healthy and happy as yeh were. Didn’t last, o’ course, what with yer Sortin’ and all...but most of us couldn’t believe that Daphne had made such o’ great mum.”

“And now, after what she did in the Chamber, people are wondering if they might have been right all along?” Harry asked. Hagrid frowned, shaking his head.

"Yer being too paranoid, 'Arry. They aren't lookin' fer reasons ter doubt her. I just think a lot of 'em are worried about yeh, yeh being who yeh are," Hagrid explained. "I think Daphne's a great woman, personally," he said. "But I see why other are a bit concerned. Especially with the way yeh act..."

Harry sat up straight, eyes searing into his friend's. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

Hagrid threw his trashcan-lid sized hands in the air. "It's nothing awful, 'Arry. Actually, fer an adult, it's a good thing. Fer a kid like yerself... 'Arry, some of us just wonder why yeh think the way yeh do. Yeh act like yeh've got the weight o' the world on yer shoulders. Yeh relax sometimes with yer friends, and yeh got a pair o' good 'uns, in 'Ermione and Ginny, but yeh don't act yer age."

"And they blame *Daphne* for that?" Harry asked incredulously. "It sounds like that's my problem."

"It *can't* be yer problem, don't yeh see?" Hagrid explained. "It's a double standard, mind, but they look at yeh as a kid, and ter be honest, 'Arry, they should. I know yeh aren't, but yer thirteen and yeh act twenty. That's not normal fer a kid yer age. So they look at the person yeh trust the most, the person yeh model yerself after..."

Harry nodded. "Are you talking about Professors? Or adults in general?"

Hagrid suddenly looked nervous. "Well, a lot o' people."

Warning bells suddenly went off in Harry's head. Suddenly, that strange feeling that Remus was hiding something made perfect sense. "It's Remus, isn't it? Professor Lupin is venting in the staffroom."

Hagrid shook his head, then paused. "Well, he's mumbled a few things. But there are others, people that were there last year. Yeh went through a tough time, but yeh didn't say anything. And things went real bad."

"I couldn't, even if I had *wanted* to," Harry argued. "Riddle controlled my thoughts, my actions, my words." He shivered involuntarily. "He *violated* me. Altered my memories. Intruded upon my most sacred place: my mind."

Hagrid nodded gravely. "That's what I might expect. Riddle was a nasty piece o' work."

Harry glanced up at him. "I forgot you went to school with him...I saw..." he paused, trying to word this correctly. "Riddle showed me the memory of the night you were expelled," Harry said softly. "I was suspicious, because I know that Acromantulas don't Petrify people. Riddle had to erase my memory of that event."

Hagrid nodded, pouring himself some more tea.

"Hagrid, do you know who Riddle became?" Harry asked slowly. To his relief, the man nodded.

"Yeah, I heard." He stared out the window. "Gives me the jitters, thinking I went to school with You-Know-Who."

Harry nodded. "I realize I haven't really gotten to what I came here to talk about."

Hagrid glanced up. "Well, I could ask the House-Elves ter bring some food. Dinner's goin' on right now."

Harry nodded. "Please."

Hagrid called an elf Harry hadn't seen before, and ordered a chicken. Harry simply asked for bread and soup; he'd lost his appetite from his conversation with Malfoy. The elf vanished, and Harry began to explain to the half-giant about the complicated matter that had so perturbed him.

Hagrid listened intently, grunting once or twice to indicate he understood what Harry was saying. Without going into too much unnecessary detail, Harry managed to explain what a Vow of Vengeance was, how it played into the Old Laws, the consequences

of the action, and the hypothetical situations that could arise. He kept talking for about ten minutes.

“...and so that’s what I’m dealing with,” Harry said, feeling exhausted, but happy to have gotten that off his chest. “I’d just started thinking I might be able to forgive Daphne for what she did to me, and now I found out that she’s vowed to kill a child my age if Lucius tries to hurt me again.”

Hagrid was silent for a while. “*Bloody purebloods*,” he mumbled under his breath. “Can’t understand the logic behind half of it, but I see yer problem. I don’t think Daphne really thought it out before she did it. I doubt she would have placed yer life in danger knowingly.”

“I’m certain of *that*,” Harry said. “But I don’t know what to do. I’m going to have to explain this to Hermione, Ginny, and probably Blaise, he knows more about this than I do-”

“Blaise?” Hagrid asked.

“Zabini,” Harry replied. “He’s sort of become my friend. I’m not sure his intentions were entirely noble in the first place, but he’s helped me out and seems to like me. And like I said, he knows a lot more about pureblood traditions than I do.”

“Bunch o’ codswallop if yeh ask me,” Hagrid grumbled. “S’remarkable, really. They call giants ‘savages’ and ‘barbarians’ and their laws have a way for yeh to kill somebody and get away with it. Two wrongs don’t make a right in my book.”

“No one ever accused wizards of being perfect,” Harry replied. “It’s the laws they live by, unfortunately.”

Hagrid was silent for a moment. “Well, I’d ask yer friend Zabini if Malfoy’s really right ‘bout all this stuff first, ‘cause it sounds like he’ll know. Then I’d write ter Daphne, and ask her to explain herself. Yer within yer rights to demand that, yeh know. She did something stupid, and she’ll have ter answer fer it.”

Harry nodded. “Thanks, Hagrid.”

The half-giant smiled, though it looked a bit forced. "No problem, 'Arry. I like talking with yeh, yer a good kid. But try ter go outside a bit, have some fun. Go flyin', I know yer good at that. Try ter relax. Yeh aren't an adult just yet."

They ate their dinner, chatting about much lighter matters, and then Hagrid escorted Harry back up to the school. Neither one noticed the pair of eyes watching them from the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

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Harry did seek out his new friend, who seemed quite pleased to see him. His smile faded though, when Harry explained was Daphne had done. Blaise hadn't helped his friend's confidence at all. Though he pointed out that Lucius would have a hell of a time legally challenging Harry to a duel to the death, (it would need to go through the Wizengamout, for one,) everything else that Draco had talked about was more or less accurate. Blaise recommended he write his guardian and find out what she thought about the whole mess.

And so it was that Harry was sitting there in the Slytherin Common Room at nearly midnight, sitting on a chair facing the fire, a textbook in his lap as a writing surface, a half-completed letter lying on top of that.

Harry sighed and reviewed what he'd written so far. He was trying not to sound confrontational, because he didn't want Daphne to panic. Unfortunately, it was rather difficult to write such a letter if anything less than an accusing tone.

*Dear Daphne,*

*I'm writing to you because I've discovered something that disturbs me greatly. In a recent conversation with Draco Malfoy, he happened to mention that you had cast a Vow of Vengeance on his family in response to the incident with the Diary. I understand that you were likely under duress and emotional, but I must question why you failed to inform me of such a crucial fact.*

*Beyond that, Daphne, I am very bothered that you would do such a thing. I do not like Draco that much: I find him bigheaded, arrogant, and confrontational, but I certainly do not wish him dead. And I am*

*quite disturbed that you would, in effect, swear to kill a boy not much older than myself in the name of vengeance upon his father.*

*You have a dark past, Daphne, there is no denying it. I wish I could do something about it; obviously I cannot. But I had hoped you would have changed in the twelve years that I have lived with you. You did a number of things in the First War that I believe that you regret; at least, I sincerely hope that you regret. But I cannot in any way support a vow to kill a child. I am angry that you would do such a thing in my name. I could never live with myself.*

*Beyond that, Daphne, I do not believe you once thought of the consequences, and for that I am sorely disappointed in you. You did not realize that if you retaliated by killing Draco, you could be arrested and tried with murder. I am sure you are aware there are a number of powerful purebloods who believe you should be locked away. If you are sent to Azkaban, where would I go? To the Muggles, the relatives of Lily's that you have described as 'pitiful human beings?' To the care of Dumbledore, whom you do not entirely trust? All of that aside, did you once consider what it would be like for me to lose you? I love you, Daphne. You were the mother I never had. It would tear me apart if I were to be permanently separated from you.*

*Nor, I believe, did you realize how a Vow of Vengeance plays into the Old Laws of Pureblood Society...*

That was as far as he had written. He didn't like the tone of the letter in the least; it sounded as if he was disciplining Daphne like a small child that had broken a minor rule. He didn't like the reference to her past, but at the same time felt it necessary to make a point. He'd never spoken much of her past, except to say that he didn't hate her for it. That remained unchanged. But he was in effect saying that he forgave her for it solely because he believed she had changed. That he was, in part, most frustrated because promising to murder a child in order to intimidate one of her old enemies was something "the old Daphne" would have done.

He buried his head in his hands, rubbing furiously at his eyes.

"I'm guessing that's *not* homework, then," Ginny's voice said from behind him.

He jumped at the sudden interruption. Ginny crossed in front of him and sat on the floor in front of the fire, directly facing him. She appeared fatigued and a bit pale, but her eyes were staring at him intently. She wrapped her arms around her blue nightgown and looked straight back at him.

Harry sighed. "I'm writing a letter to Daphne," he explained simply.

Ginny's glare hardened. "Normally, you don't agonize over something as simple as that. You are *hiding* something, Harry, and whatever it is, I don't like it. You weren't at dinner today, Malfoy was acting as if he'd be crowned the King of England, you looked *miserable* when I saw you last, you avoided me and Hermione...and now I find you here at midnight working on a simple *letter*?"

"You're right, there is something bothering me."

"Something *Daphne* did?" Ginny asked intently.

"Yes," Harry blurted. "She did something incredibly stupid that could get *me* killed and *herself* thrown into Azkaban!"

Ginny paled noticeably. Harry gave her an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have blown up like that..."

"Forget it," the redhead said dismissively. "What happened?"

Harry paused, then proceeded to explain, in brief, what he knew about a Vow of Vengeance. Ginny said she'd heard the term before, though she couldn't remember when or where. She was frowning heavily when it was over. "I see your problem," she said softly. "So that's what you are trying to write a letter about?" she asked, eyeing the parchment in his lap.

Harry nodded. "It's a lot to fit inside a simple letter," he admitted. "But I don't know if I can face her right now, even if I could floo call her or something like that. I *need* to hear that she's sorry, that she thinks it was incredibly stupid and she won't do something that idiotic again."

Ginny suddenly looked worried. "What if she doesn't?" she asked in a whisper, so quiet that Harry almost couldn't hear her. When he did register what she said, he thought he must have heard incorrectly.

"What?"

"What if she *doesn't*?" Ginny repeated a little louder. "What if she's convinced she did the right thing, and that she's capable of dealing with the consequences."

"That's won't *happen*," Harry said with far more confidence than he had. "If she thought it was the right thing to do, why didn't she tell me herself, rather than setting me up for a disaster with Malfoy?"

"I doubt she had that in mind," Ginny admitted. She sobered. "But what if she hid it from you because she knew you'd react this way? What if she-"

"It's not *true*, alright," Harry said angrily, cutting her off. "She's knows she made a mistake. She couldn't just accept the fact that promising to *kill* Draco was the *right* thing to do. That makes her no better than...than..."

"A Death Eater?" Ginny asked softly, anxiously. "She isn't that, Harry. And it isn't just because she isn't Marked or loyal to *him*. She's a good person, Harry, but I don't like the way she thinks all the time."

"What do you know about her?" Harry demanded. "You barely know her!" *Surely she isn't naïve enough to think that spending one Christmas Break in the same house as Daphne gives her deep insight into her mind and soul. I've lived with her for twelve-years. I'm the only one left who understands her.*

*Do you?*

"Maybe that's true," Ginny admitted. "But I see the way she acts around you. She's conflicted, Harry. She wants to give you freedom, yet she also feels the need to protect you. The only reason you are still at Hogwarts is because she respects that you *want* to be here."

"I have friends here, opportunities." Ginny looked at him suspiciously. "I don't mean purebloods, I mean the Library, the classes. I like it here...and what does that have to do with *Daphne*?"

Ginny shook her head, and Harry felt his frustration growing. "Everything," she said. "Don't you understand? She wants to keep you safe, so she'll take insane steps without even thinking about it. She swore that Vow to protect you, but she was so focused that she probably didn't think about the long-term consequences. However, she's fully willing to kill Draco to keep you safe. And Lucius knows that. That's why her threat worked."

"But how—"

"Harry, it doesn't make that much sense to you or to me, but it does to her. Your life, to her, is worth a thousand of Draco's lives. She doesn't care about him. She's being coldhearted, but she's doing it because she loves you...she's like Mum, really. She'd die to defend us..."

"...but she's not nearly as dangerous as Daphne is," Harry finished softly.

Ginny nodded. "You can't change it, Harry. She loves you too much to let her morals get in the way," Ginny said as she let go. "I think she's afraid of losing you, not just to death, but simply having you reject her because you don't like who she is." She spoke softly, so quietly that it wasn't clear if she had complete confidence in what she was saying, but Harry could tell that she meant every word. Ginny had developed into a person that was very good at reading people. While Hermione tended to focus on what could be read from books, though she did have some understanding of feelings and emotions, and Harry tended to look at the big picture, Ginny occasionally demonstrated a tremendous understanding of why people behaved the way they did. Harry could speculate, but Ginny knew.

Harry sighed, digesting the truth of her statement. It wasn't as if it wasn't something he'd known all along. He knew how determined Daphne was to protect him. That *didn't* mean that he approved of her methods. Still, he was going to need to rethink his letter home. The one he had written simply would not do. *I can't be that angry with her*

*now. I can't tell her that I think she loves me too much. What kind of message does that send?*

Ginny wasn't finished, however. "Oh, there's one other thing. Adrian Pucey was looking for you at dinner. He says that Quidditch tryouts will be held tomorrow after afternoon classes, and that you are going to have to compete for your spot again. Malfoy's got his heart set on the Seeker position."

Harry nodded. "Are you planning to try out?" he asked.

Ginny winced. "I really don't know. I'd like too, because I love the game and I'm a pretty good flyer, but I don't really think I'll get a fair chance. If Malfoy loses the Seeker role to you he'll probably retake his Chaser position. And I'm no Beater," she said with a slight chuckle, indicating her slender frame. "Anne plans to try out for Beater, though, and I reckon she'll get it."

Harry had to admit he'd given Quidditch little or no thought for months. First, he'd been occupied by his recovery, and flying required concentration he simply did not possess at the time. Then he'd been sidetracked by the Prophecy and all of his other duties. He hadn't flown since the last match of the season, when Slytherin had more or less clinched the Quidditch Cup. Gryffindor had tried (and failed) to achieve a 480 point victory over Ravenclaw, officially returning the title to the Serpents.

"You haven't given one thought to Quidditch yet this year, have you?" Ginny asked suspiciously when he didn't respond to her earlier statement. "What's wrong with you, Harry? You used to love flying, and now its about eightieth on your priority list. You act like you've got to unify the whole bloody wizarding world before your fourteenth birthday." Ginny's glare had an intensity behind it that exceeded the guilt that Harry felt from Hermione's. Perhaps it was that Ginny had a nastier temper behind it, or did not possess the reluctance of Hermione to push him when he clearly didn't want to be pushed.

"I-

"Save it," Ginny said, obviously quite cross with him. "It's late, I'm tired, you're tired, and I don't want to have this argument now. That doesn't mean I'm going to forget it...and don't give me *that* look."

Harry wiped the expression of exasperation from his face and yawned rather loudly. "Even your body agrees with me," Ginny continued. "You won't be able to think clearly enough to write anything deep and meaningful this late at night. Toss it out, find another time when you are actually awake, and do it then...and you are showing up tomorrow, even if I have to stun you, drag you to the pitch, and risk imprisonment by learning the Imperius Curse and forcing you to fly at your best." The tone of Ginny's voice left no doubt that she meant every single word.

With that, she got up and stalked down the steps to the Second Year Girl's Dormitory. Harry rubbed his eyes tiredly, got up, and re-read his letter again. He made his decision, rolled up the parchment into a ball, and flipped it into the fire. He watched in burn, flames consuming it as the edges blackened and curled up. The last words he saw were the greeting as the letter was consumed and fell apart into pieces of ash. He picked up the textbook and headed up towards his dormitory, parts of what Ginny had said still swirling in his mind.

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True to her word, Ginny showed up with Anne Grunitch twenty minutes before Harry had planned to go to the Pitch and dragged both Harry and Hermione away from their work. It had been a rather unremarkable day of Charms, Herbology, and Transfiguration, so Harry was in a cheerful mood. Hermione was a bit more reluctant to leave her books, but finally packed up and came along. Harry headed to the changing room, Hermione went to the stands. A number of non-Slytherins were watching the proceedings, cheering on friends. When Harry emerged dressed in his green and silver robes, carrying his trusty Nimbus 2000 broomstick under one arm, he found Ginny waiting for him.

Ginny appeared rather nervous and self-conscious. She was wearing what appeared to be a badly-fitted, beaten up set of dark blue Quidditch robes and trainers. Harry guessed the robes likely belonged to either Fred or George and had been Transfigured to

approximately fit Ginny's small frame and also to lack the colors and emblem of the Gryffindor Lions. She carried a broomstick that appeared to have been done in quite a while ago. Harry thought it was a Cleansweep Four, but the model name had been so faded that it was impossible to tell. The shaft of the broom was splintered and worn, and twigs stuck out from the tail at random intervals. Ginny blushed slightly as Harry casually examined the broom. "It's the best I could come up with," she admitted. "Fred and George might have been willing but Oliver forbade them for fear of sabotage and I didn't want to use one of the old school brooms; they're even *older* than this museum piece."

"You could borrow my broom," Harry suggested. It was a temporary solution, of course. On that note, he asked, "If you make the team, would your parents at least buy you your own broom?" He was careful to omit words like 'better' or 'newer.' He knew how aware Ginny was of her family's financial situation.

Ginny frowned. "I don't know. Fred and George were given brooms, and even Ron got a second-hand Cleansweep Seven. But I don't know if we could afford it...brooms are very expensive."

*That* was absolutely true. Harry thought about asking if he could help chip in to purchase a broom for his friend, but killed that thought almost instantly. Her parents would politely decline, Ron would raise hell, and Ginny might feel like he was giving her charity. *Bad idea on all counts.*

"You won't be able to lend me your broom anyway," she said. "We'll probably be flying at the same time. I don't expect to make it anyway."

"Unfortunately, you're probably right. Even if you out fly Malfoy, his father's name carried a lot of clout in Slytherin," Harry admitted. He smiled at her encouragingly. "Just do your best with what you have, tune out anything Malfoy says, and see what happens," he advised.

"I know," Ginny replied cheerfully enough, though Harry could still hear the slight worry in her voice. "Anne's going to make it. Her opposition is Crabbe and Goyle."

Harry shivered. "That is a combination I don't want responsible for protecting me. Malfoy might order them to knock me out so that he can take my spot."

Ginny nodded, smiling. "Don't worry about it; I doubt you will have a problem. Just stop thinking about politics and purebloods and everything for a few hours, have some fun, and make Malfoy go crying to his Mum."

Harry smiled wickedly. "Miss Ginevra Weasley, I'm surprised by you...nonetheless; I plan to do just that."

Ginny's tryout went about as well as could be expected. Malfoy made a number of derogatory comments towards her broom, family wealth and uniform, but Ginny seemed to have taken Harry's advice to heart and became mysteriously deaf whenever Draco opened his mouth. Ginny flew well, though she was a bit erratic in both throwing and catching. She didn't seem to have a great deal of confidence, but seemed to be at least attempting to enjoy herself. Still, it seemed like she was going through the motions more than anything else. She was also a bit anxious and looked inexperienced. With time, Harry could see that she could develop her considerable talent. She simply wasn't the natural that Harry was. Malfoy didn't even try out for Chaser, which indicated he was either obnoxiously overconfident in his abilities to beat Harry, or that he'd already struck a deal with Pucey and was guaranteed a spot on the team.

Harry was very impressed by Anne Grunitch when it came time for the Beaters to tryout. She was a good size for a Beater; though not at all short, she had a stocky, strong frame. She didn't hit Bludgers; she *punished* them. Harry was amazed she hadn't dented the metal balls with the force of her blows. Pucey whistled in amazement as her aim proved just as good. She obliterated the charmed targets. Harry suddenly felt sorry for the three girls who played Chaser for Gryffindor. Crabbe and Goyle were far less impressive, though they still outshone the two or three other competitors and their half-hearted efforts. Goyle appeared slightly less ungainly in the air, and his aim wasn't terrible. Crabbe flew like a flying brick, and whiffed at more Bludgers than he hit solidly. The winners were clear.

Keeper proved...interesting. Since Miles had left, her replacement had been Chester Warrington, who had been unsatisfactory at best. Tracey Davis, one of the girls in Harry's year that he did not know at all, had also tried out for Chaser, but ended up outflying Warrington and blocking far more goals. The brown-haired girl of average height appeared to be the winner.

Next up were the Seekers. Harry and Draco were the only competitors, the rest of the field realizing they had absolutely no chance. Pucey's method of testing them was rather simply. Rather than risking the tryouts running into the night by using a real Snitch, he simply cast a Slowing Charm on one of the practice Snitches, meaning that the catch would be made sooner because the Snitch wasn't as maneuverable or as quick as it would normally be.

Harry knew that even if Malfoy beat him, as long as he demonstrated hints of the ability that Pucey knew he had from the previous two years, the captain would have little choice but to give him the job. No matter how much Draco whined to the contrary, Pucey wanted to win as badly as anyone, and Harry simply gave them a better shot at doing that. That said, Harry fully intended to keep his promise to Ginny. He focused on his task, letting his other responsibilities slip from his mind.

It was no contest. Harry was focused and a great deal sharper than he would have expected, and despite his rival's newer broom, Harry's quick movements, superior tracking ability, and better Seeking instincts had the Snitch vainly attempting to escape the gloved palm of his right hand in less than five minutes, with Draco lagging a considerable distance behind. In some ways, his victory meant more than his rival's, because it happened in front of their peers. Harry refused to gloat, which made the other boy even more furious. Finally, his loud complaints that the test was unfair were silenced by a hungry Adrian Pucey, who impatiently put him through a ridiculously easy Chasing drill, took unnecessary notes, and announced that he'd post the team roster the next day.

Ginny seemed disappointed in her performance, but quite pleased by Harry's victory. Harry thought she might also be celebrating her own victory. For that night at least, she had managed to force Harry to do

something that kids his age were supposed to do...and have fun in the process.

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As Harry had hoped, Third Year classes were shaping up to be a bit more challenging than they had been in the past. Transfiguration had become much more difficult as they began to explore the enormous field of animal Transfiguration. Potions had become quite a challenge, though Harry's excellent attention to detail was serving him well. For the first time, while they could still work with a partner, both students were required to brew and bottle their own potions. While they could exchange information, share ingredients, and alert each other to mistakes, Snape was rather strict on the issue of 'too much help.' Especially among the Gryffindors.

Despite all of that, Hermione had taken pity on the struggling Neville Longbottom, who might soon run through the family fortune at the rate he was melting cauldrons. Harry had advised the boy during their encounter that summer to play to his strengths and use his knowledge and aptitude with magical plants to improve his Potions skills. Hermione was attempting to put that idea into action, reminding Neville about plants that he knew the properties of. Harry just hoped she resisted whispering information out of the corner of her mouth; that was *guaranteed* to draw Snape's ire.

The end result was that Harry was working with Blaise. He could certainly ask for worse than that. Harry had been steadily improving in Potions so that he, Moon, Hermione, and Malfoy ranked at the top of the class. Harry attributed it to his good memory and attention to detail. He paid enough attention that he could spot an unfavorable reaction as it began, and knew enough about the ingredients to know which one to neutralize it with. Snape seemed quite pleasantly surprised by Harry's talent. Daphne had told him that Lily had been quite good, so perhaps he wasn't as shocked as he might have been. Blaise was competent, but not exemplary. He could follow instructions, he remembered what had been in their reading. He did have a tendency to become too relaxed and distracted.

Harry added the cockroach shells, stirred twice, and checked his watch. He had ten minutes to allow the half-completed Numbing

Potion to boil. He checked the temperature with a quick spell, and found it was within the acceptable ranges. Blaise had just completed the previous step and was leaning back his chair. "Four stirs, Blaise," Harry reminded him. His friend glared at him slightly, embarrassed at forgetting. He added the fourth stir.

"Not going to thank me?" Harry asked, checking his watch.

"Don't get full of yourself, Potter," Blaise grumbled.

Harry stared at him. "What's wrong with you today?" Blaise was normally quite relaxed and cheerful, though he could become focussed and intent in a heartbeat. It was quite unusual for him to be this grumpy.

"Nothing of your concern," Blaise replied, slumping back in his seat. He snickered slightly as Snape critiqued Weasley and Thomas's Potion. Harry didn't find it that amusing, and simply rechecked his work to insure that Snape could not complain about what was in his cauldron.

Harry looked at him hard. In a low voice, he whispered, "Blaise, I told you about the Room of Requirement. I confided in you about what my guardian did...surely you can tell your friend what's got your knickers in a twist?"

Blaise scowled at him. "My mother," he replied quietly. "She's...displeased about something," he said quickly.

"And that something would be...?" Harry prodded.

Blaise stared at him. "Do you really want to know?"

Harry considered this, from what he'd gathered thus far, the odds were good that it somehow involved him. "Yes."

"Fine," Blaise said, adding the cockroach shells. "I approached you originally because she told me to. The warning I gave you was my idea, though," he admitted. "Mum is very interested in you...and I warn you, that isn't necessarily a good thing. I love her, but I've got no illusions about the fact that her first six husbands all died, leaving

their fortunes to her. She and Dad do get along quite well, so I don't see him joining the ranks, as it were."

Harry nodded. He was surprised that Blaise spoke so lightly of his mother potentially being responsible for the death of six men, but when one considered that not only did they likely marry her for *her* fortune and her beauty, one came to the realization that the entire thing was barmy. *Whatever helps him sleep at night*, Harry thought. *My guardian has committed crimes that, without permission from the Ministry, could have sent her to the Dementors.* Harry checked his watch, waited a few seconds, then levitated the cauldron off of the fire.

Blaise peered at his own watch, saw he had more time, and continued. "Point is, Potter, that I didn't exactly befriend you with the tamest of intentions. Mum asked me to try to find out more about you. Doubt her requests would have gotten farther than that, but..."

Harry nodded, understanding what he meant.

"Thing is," he continued. "I like you. You're intelligent, skilled, and just fun to be around. You trust me, and I have no intention of betraying that trust. I *want* to be your friend." He paused, taking his own cauldron off the fire. She's not too pleased that I'm actually friends with the Boy-Who-Lived...and before you jump to any conclusions, it's not for any reason you might suspect. Mother has no loyalty to the Dark Lord, nor does father...you see, Potter, our family has been straddling the fence in the battle between Light and Dark for centuries. We didn't take sides in the war against Grindelwald, nor did we swear allegiance to Dumbledore and the Ministry..."

"And associating with the Boy-Who-Lived goes against all that?" Harry replied incredulously. "I may be linked to the Light, and some might make the stupid assumption that I'm their little 'pocket savior,' but the only thing that Daphne and I are committed to is fighting against Voldemort. Daphne doesn't trust Dumbledore as much as she used to. She *certainly* doesn't trust the Ministry."

Blaise raised an intrigued eyebrow. "So wherever your guardian goes, you follow? I would have thought you'd be a bit more open."

"How so? Daphne is committed to protecting *me*, but for now, she's got more experience in the world than I do. I don't accept her decisions without proper thought, but so far, she hasn't steered me wrong."

"Then perhaps you are bit too reliant on her," Blaise said, his voice becoming a whisper as Snape spared an annoyed glance in their direction. When Blaise quieted and Harry gave his cauldron two counterclockwise turns followed by three clockwise turns, the Potions Master went back to slaughtering essays. Harry checked the instructions, picked out three owl feathers, and dropped them in, before turning back to his partner.

"Explain," he said simply. His initial inclination was the dismiss the notion, but just a few seconds of deep thought was enough to realize that he might be right. He wanted to hear his friend's reasoning.

"Well," Blaise began, "I understand that she *is* your guardian and that you implicitly trust her. But as wise as that appears on the surface, her decisions have been questionable in the past, to say the least."

Harry couldn't argue with that. "I think I'm already putting proper thought into my own future. Daphne says she'll advise me, but that she won't stop me from interacting with purebloods, or do it for me."

Blaise frowned. "Potter, sometimes I don't think you understand this: you are not only a Half-Blood, but you are also the Boy-Who-Lived. As stupid as it may be, most wizards will think you are a stupid, spoiled child with an inflated sense of self-importance, or a drone of Dumbledore's. That's the Dark purebloods, or the 'fence-straddlers,' like my family. The Light families think your guardian is nuts, and that she's misleading you. You have a penchant for learning Dark spells, I've observed."

Harry frowned. He hadn't considered that before. "Yes, Daphne and I both think it's necessary. No Unforgivables, of course. Things like the Slicing or Severing Curse."

"That's pretty tame," Blaise admitted. "My family thinks it's a joke that Aurors are allowed to use both, yet a normal wizard can be thrown into the jail under the Ministry for a week for using them. Do it a

couple times and you earn a short stay in Azkaban...of course, one has to perform them in full view of an Auror to actually be *caught*, but the rule is stupid nonetheless. There's a couple of others you might want to work on."

"Such as?" Harry asked.

"All in good time," Blaise replied.

Harry completed the final step on the instructions, adding a few Healey Bush leaves. A few stirs later and the potion was the exact dark blue that the textbook specified. Harry allowed himself a contented smile, then levitated a vial into the Numbing Potion and collected a sample. He stuffed a cork into it and placed it on his desk. Blaise's potion was off by a few shades, but he did the same. Harry glanced over and saw that Hermione had already finished hers, which was slightly off, and was now trying to help a frantic Neville Longbottom salvage a dark green mess.

"That's enough, Granger," Snape's icy voice snapped from the front of the room. Hermione reluctantly pulled back and sat in her seat, looking decidedly unhappy. Neville had a kind of resigned look on his face. Snape walked up and immediately began berating him. *No small wonder that he's deathly afraid of Snape.* Leaving the quaking boy in his wake, Snape began to circulate among the tables, picking up vials and making caustic comments. He seemed to spend more time examining the vials of the Gryffindors than those of the Slytherins. He commented half-heartedly about the excellence of Hermione's vial, then looked like he was considering whether to 'accidentally' drop it. He decided against it. He approached Harry, commented that his potion was 'very good,' but more importantly, stared in his eyes for a few seconds. Harry didn't have time muster his Occlumency defense, but it seemed Snape's intentions were not malevolent.

*Stay after class, Potter. We have something important to discuss.*

The voice in his mind, unmistakably Snape's, did not sound angry or dark, so Harry figured he wasn't in trouble for anything. The bell rang, and Snape assigned two full chapters of reading...and deducted five points for Weasley's griping.

Blaise and Hermione both gave him a surprised look when he didn't follow them out of the classroom. Harry tried to tell them he'd see them later, but they didn't get the message. Regardless, Blaise simply shrugged and left, while Hermione hung in the doorway.

Harry's Head of House glanced up from the butchered essays covering his desk. "Granger, I intend to hold a *private* conversation with Potter. I assure you, he will be returned to you alive and well."

Hermione looked reluctant, but disappeared out the door. Once her footsteps faded down the hall, Snape looked up at him. "Sit," he ordered, Summoning a chair over. Harry did.

There was a long, uncomfortable pause. "Dressler made a most unusual request of me," he began, spitting the name of Daphne's guardian in distaste. "She wants me to teach you Occlumency."

Harry nodded, aware of the fact. "I have...a certain secret to protect-

"You are aware of the full text of the Prophecy?" Snape asked, not looking at him. "I, personally, am not. For *obvious* reasons."

Snape's meaning was clear. Even if Dumbledore trusted Snape, he couldn't risk the ex-Death Eater having any damaging memories that Voldemort could pry from his mind. "That's not entirely correct, sir," Harry explained. "Daphne walled off the memory of the content itself, and informed me that it concerned myself and Voldemort, and that it was important."

"Please do not speak his name in my presence, Potter. Think of it as a common courtesy. You will refer to him as the 'Dark Lord' or if you must, 'You-Know-Who'."

"Yes, sir."

Snape studied him for a moment. The venom that had been present in his voice for two years had disappeared entirely. Snape seemed to have finally accepted that Harry considered himself related to James Potter in nothing but blood, and that he considered himself one of Snape's Slytherins, nothing more, nothing less. Harry only wished it hadn't taken so long. Snape was hardly one for comforting words, but

the man was intelligent and shrewd, and could be a valuable person to have on his side, war or no war. The tone that he used now was that of a superior speaking to one of lower rank. It was business-like and brief, not condescending. "Perhaps that was wise, perhaps not. It doesn't matter. If we come to war again, your ability to protect your thoughts will be important. The Dark Lord is connected to you, Potter, by that scar."

Harry nodded. He knew that.

"What have you learned thus far?" Snape asked in a somewhat bored tone, marking a poorly-written Potions essay with a flourish. Then he paused. "Don't answer, I'll find out myself. Attempt to keep me out as long as you can. I do not intend to coddle you, Potter, because the Dark Lord or his minions will not. You possess terrible memories that make excellent weapons. You will learn to stomach them, or this process will be rather unpleasant."

Snape scowled. "In the interest of progress, I will be casting the spell verbally and with a wand. Eventually, we will move past that." He straightened. "Prepare yourself. *Legilimens!*"

Harry had no delusions that he'd be able to delay Snape for long, let alone keep him out. He began with one of the most basic techniques, calling to mind pointless, uninteresting memories. He started with a window at an empty field in Claw's Clan, then listening to Professor Binns droning about a twelfth-century goblin rebellion; sitting alone in the Common Room reading his Transfiguration textbook; waiting patiently in Madam Malkin's for the owner to return with his robes...

Snape caught up with him, and he caught a glimpse of his guardian's face twisted in a vindictive sneer before Snape withdrew. He scowled at Harry. "Pathetic," he said. "Has Dressler merely taught you to distract an intruder? Your mind is arranged like a library, a library where certain bookcases stick out like a sore thumb. Those are the bookcases containing memories you'd rather not recall...you will need to keep a hostile *Legilimens out*, beyond the library. There is a misty area out every person's mind, Potter."

"Should I attempt to lose them there?" Harry asked.

Snape glared at him. "Of course not you idiot boy!" he snapped. "Did *nothing* of what I just said about keeping intruders *out* penetrate your thick skull?"

"I apologize," Harry said politely. "I made a stupid assumption, sir."

"Yes, you did," Snape replied. He got up and motioned for Harry to follow. They went down the hall towards his office. Snape entered, gestured for Harry to stay put, and began rooting around for something. He emerged carrying a large, old book called: *Occlumency: The Forgotten Arte*. "Read this, or at least skim it. I expect you to have a much greater idea of what to do next time. The tactic I employ is that of 'clearing the mind' to stop an enemy, then pushing them out. It is not the *only* tactic; your guardian utilizes mental walls, but then again, she spent years constructing them. And they serve more than one purpose."

"To keep intruders out, but also to keep her anger in," Harry replied.

"In a simple sense. But I have no wish to discuss the disturbed mind of Dressler. Do the reading, then report to me on Thursday night. You have Detention with me now for being an insolent brat, do you understand?"

"Yes, Professor," Harry replied.

"Good," he said gruffly. "Perhaps this will not be quite as torturous as I once feared. If you apply the same amount of effort and focus to Occlumency as you do to Potions, this will be as painless as possible. I will be informing you of each lesson at my leisure. Keep your schedule open. Now get out of my sight."

---

*Are you really that surprised? Daphne Dressler asked herself. Did you really think you could hide such a drastic action from him? You've raised him yourself. He's intelligent and persistent. Worse, you put him at a disadvantage and forced him to discover what you did from Lucius's son of all people.*

Daphne slumped back against her chair, reading the letter in front of her. *Harry simply doesn't understand what he's asking. He's asking*

*me to change who I am. He's asking me to remove an avenue of protection that I feel is crucial to keeping him alive. I believe that Lucius is the most dangerous Death Eater not incarcerated in Azkaban. I can't simply remove the only leverage I have. I have no intention of killing Draco Malfoy. Just as Lucius will not risk attempting to harm Harry.*

She opened the roll of parchment again, tired eyes running over the relatively short letter.

*Daphne,*

*Draco Malfoy informed me in a conversation recently that you swore a Vow of Vengeance against his family. I cannot understand why you would do this; even if you are trying to protect my life, I am not pleased that you would kill a child in my name. That is what Draco is. He is not his father, not yet, anyway. He does not deserve to be held responsible for the actions of his father.*

*In addition, he revealed to me that you may have inadvertently placed both of our lives in danger. I'm sure you know that if you killed Draco or Lucius, the Malfoy family could legally challenge you to a duel to the death. Or, if they preferred, they could charge you with murder. I will give you the benefit of the doubt and hope that you were not of sound mind when you made this decision. Because I would be quite bothered if you had realized at the time that you might be sent to Azkaban. Who would I live with then? Would you put it past Dumbledore to send me where I would be safest, with Lily's relatives? I'd be a laughing stock in Slytherin, not to mention depressed and angry from losing you. I hope you didn't realize this.*

*In addition, most disturbing is that by the Old Laws, the Malfoys could challenge me to a duel in order to avenge the death of their Magical Heir. As your sole ward, I am the most likely candidate, and while my lack of an official title might make it difficult, it is not impossible. I will assume that you were not aware of this, as I doubt that you would ever willingly place my life in danger.*

*I wish that you had trusted me enough to tell me this, even in my condition. It was alarming and unnerving to hear it from a rival as I did.*

*I expect an explanation of some sort. I love you, Daphne, but I cannot simply ignore a potential threat to my life, or to yours.*

*Yours,*

*Harry*

Daphne frowned again at the carefully constructed letter. The tone was somewhat accusatory, not that she blamed her ward. She made a decision that she regretted somewhat in hindsight. It was necessary, but there may have been other ways to keep Lucius at bay. *Harry doesn't understand. I'm concerned with his life, and no others. Lucius is a fool if he's filling his child with delusions that even with the Vow executed, the Malfoys could still harm Harry and get away with it. There is no court in Britain, much less the Wizengamot itself, where they will agree to place the life of the Boy-Who-Lived in jeopardy. If Lucius's influence runs that deep...I daresay we should leave and let the corruption of the Ministry fester as it will. I can do many things, but I cannot control governments.*

Daphne got up and walked to the front door, taking a step outside. She gazed heavenward, staring into the starry sky. This far from any major city, the sight was breathtaking. She'd always liked Astronomy, even if she wasn't the best at it. Her eyes focused on a particular constellation. She traced it absently with a finger.

*Orion, the hunter.*

Her eyes flicked across the sky.

*Sirius, the dog star.*

She smiled amusedly as her eyes slid to the moon.

*The Ancients had it wrong. It is the Huntress he has to fear the most.*

*Artemis.*

---

A/N: I promise I'll get the plot moving soon, but I needed to set up a lot of things first. Hopefully you aren't all bored out of your minds.

Well, that's Daphne's response to Harry's slightly-edited letter. This isn't really an essential plot element, it's more of a long-term consequence thing. Daphne and Harry are growing apart, just as they have to.

Blaise is interesting, and I wouldn't want to be in his situation.

I don't look at Hagrid as a kind of clueless brute. I think he's rather brutish at times, but he sympathizes with Harry's situation, and Harry trusts him. Hagrid's thoughts as quite as deep as Hermione's, but he's not as thick as I've seen him.

As for Ginny, before anyone jumps on me and contests Ginny's knowledge of human beings, keep in mind that unlike Harry and Hermione, who were ostracized by others, Ginny has known little else but acceptance. She still possesses a childlike naivety that gives her a different perspective than the more hardened Harry and Hermione. She was smothered in love and understanding by her extremely close family. Now that she's in Hogwarts, she's beginning to incorporate her experiences with her childhood beliefs, and can see somethings that Harry cannot. Harry is also not willing to believe that his guardian is evil. He's constantly looking to find alterior motives. Harry is also already starting to forget about himself, living his life in terms of the entire wizarding world. That's the ultimate burden of the prophecy: knowing that he has to do *something* significant, and do it now. Harry will find all sorts of allies, some loyal, some not. And quite a few whose loyalty is dependent upon various factors.

Keep this in mind: Harry, Voldemort, and Dumbledore are the most powerful wizards of the time, in terms of magical potential. Ginny isn't, and will not be, as powerful as Daphne. Hermione is quite powerful, and her talent manifests itself in a reason that will be explained in time. Luna is something else altogether.

Nor is Ginny as good as Harry at flying. I'm avoiding Mary Sue traits like the plague. At least, I'm trying to.

Someone brought up that I stated that Sirius was an excellent duelist. Well, it's an AU, and I can do that. Bellatrix is just as good, so think of it as something that runs in the Black family. As for Flitwick..? Well, Rowling mentions that there was a *rumour* that he was a dueling champion in his day. But Lord knows how old he is, and he is something of a joke in canon. He didn't fight in the DoM, got knocked unconscious without firing a shot in HBP. I cannot see Filtwick dominating top Death Eaters, it just doesn't work. Just something someone had mentioned.

I don't hate Sirius; he's a good man at heart. I hate the way that he appears to be perfect, just as James Potter was perfect. I also have zero sympathy for James Potter, because I can relate to Snape. James was an absolute bastard in school, and his harassment shaped Snape into the bitter, heartless, nasty human being he is today. James may have changed, though I don't believe it happened over night. But taking off Snape's underwear in front of the school? What kind of stupid, misguided, screwed up person does that? They attacked Snape for their own amusement. That hits a bit too close to home with me. I don't need sympathy or pity; I've gotten over it. But that's why I've shaped Harry's opinion of his father and Sirius the way I have.

Snape's much nicer to Snape because of a combination of Harry's acceptance of his father's faults, his talent in potions (which I associated with an attention to detail that canon Harry lacks,) and the fact that Harry is a Slytherin. Harry's not going to be crying into his robes anytime soon, though. There is a professional relationship between teacher and student.

Well, that's about it. Anything else, please leave a review, and I'll attempt to help you out. If you leave an anonymous review, I'll try to address your issues in the next author's notes.

## Chapter 11: Ambush

"Uh, Harry...?" a nervous-sounding voice asked. Harry started, then prepared to arm himself until he saw who it was. Harry was in the library, reading through a book on Occlumency that Daphne had recommended. Ginny was somewhere else, doing homework. Hermione was searching for information on Unicorns, though Harry was not completely sure why. Blaise was nowhere to be found.

Standing behind him was Neville Longbottom, rocking back and forth slightly on his ungainly feet, wearing his typically miserable expression. His eyes darted back and forth anxiously. "Yes?" Harry asked, closing the book and dropping it into his bag.

"I...I hope I'm not interrupting anything," the boy said. "I just...well, I wanted to talk to you..." He glanced around again, as if expecting Ron Weasley to jump out from behind one of the bookshelves. *Scratch that; Ron's not subtle enough to manage something like that. Snape, on the other hand...*

"You aren't," Harry lied slightly. He *had* been reading the introduction to an interesting alternative theory, but he was willing to listen to the Gryffindor. Harry liked Neville, he was honest and hard working, but cursed with an abysmal memory and terribly lacking in self-confidence. The boy was constantly anticipating his next failure, a mindset that made success almost impossible. Harry felt a great deal of sympathy for Neville, and had decided to help out when he could. Few students, but Neville's parents had been tortured into insanity and remained alive in the Permanent Care Ward of St. Mungo's, where Neville visited them as often as he could. Harry often wondered just how much good that did him. "Take a seat," he offered.

"I just...well, you're the only person I can talk to about this..." Neville mumbled.

Harry considered him. "You want to talk about your parents?" Harry asked quietly.

"Sort of," Neville said. "I know this is a kind of strange question, but...what's it like having dead parents...no, that's not what I wanted to say, I meant..."

"I think the question you're searching for is: Which orphan is worse off? The one who knows his parents aren't coming back, or the one that cannot give up hope." Harry said slowly, hoping he was correct.

Neville looked at Harry in awe, then realized he was staring and look down at his hands. "I dunno," he said lamely. "...I've just been thinking about it, a lot. Gran's so *proud* of them, and even though I know it hurts her to see them like *that*, she still wants to go...I suppose it's nice to see my parents, but I just..."

"No comfort comes of it," Harry finished, looking him straight in the eyes. "You don't see your parents, you see rather pathetic human beings that are a shell of their former selves." Harry had chosen his words carefully, and knew that he might trigger a very angry response. He was not disappointed.

Neville turned bright red, and his blue eyes burned with rage. "*What gives you the right...?*"

"Nothing," Harry said simply. "But I just said something that you've begun to understand as you grow older. Your parents *were* great people, Neville. They were strong, brave, and caring. But they are *gone*. They aren't coming back."

Neville stared at him for a long moment. "I'm sorry-"

Harry cut him off. "Don't be," he assured him. "I had no right to say what I did, and I admit I said it to be hurtful...but that's because I'm trying to make you come out and admit what you truly feel. You *need* to believe in yourself, to be willing to question the opinions of others...especially your grandmother."

Neville opened his mouth as if to retort, but could say nothing. He stared at his hands, turning red from his shame.

"Neville, just because I understand this doesn't mean *you* should have. The fact that you are able to is remarkable enough in itself."

"It's just hard," Neville said, putting his head in his hands. "I just see them there, just *existing*...it's just...*wrong*...I don't want to remember

them like *that!*" he exclaimed, prompting Madam Pince to shush him loudly.

"Then *don't*," Ginny's voice came from behind them. She stood there alone, a pile of books in her hands.

"How much did you hear?" Neville demanded.

Ginny winced. "Enough to understand some things I've heard before."

Harry suddenly had a thought. "Neville, *why* are you frightened of people knowing what happened to your parents? I understand that some would mock you for it, but you only told me because I already knew."

"Because I don't want them to think my parents are a couple of loonies," Neville said softly, tears coming to his eyes. "Everybody *already* thinks that I'm a bloody Squib," the boy continued, choking up. He looked at Harry intensely. "I *hate* my parents sometimes," he whispered quietly. "I hate them for not being there."

He took a deep breath, then met Harry's eyes again. "Do you?"

Harry had a flash of understanding. "Is that what you wanted to ask me?"

Neville nodded. Harry considered his response. There was only one honest answer. "No," he said. "I don't."

Neville looked deflated, and Harry realized he needed to do some damage control. Ginny got to him first. "But Harry's different," Ginny insisted. "He has Daphne, a woman who is completely devoted to him. He's a lot closer to her than you are to your grandmum, I think."

"Neville," Harry said, reaching over and gently squeezing the boy's arm. "I don't hate my parents because I don't know them. Most importantly, I don't really *need* to know them...yes, it would be *nice* to have a normal mother and a father, but Daphne's been everything I could have ever hoped for." Harry knew he was telling the truth. If she had been anything before her past had finally caught up with her, she'd been a devoted, loving mother. "It doesn't mean your

grandmother is a bad person, by the way. But she doesn't understand you, it's easy to tell." Neville glanced up at him in surprise. "She's quite imposing, and you are intimidated by her. It's just the way she is. It's not because you are a coward...she was a terror when she was in politics."

Neville chuckled slightly. "I can imagine that." His expression turned serious. "But what you were saying before..?"

Harry considered. "Ginny, would you mind if we finished this conversation in private?" he asked. The redhead looked disappointed, but nodded and left. Harry turned back to the expectant Gryffindor. "I was saying that the condition that your parents are in doesn't do them justice. It's an insult."

"Maybe I wouldn't put it that far..."

Harry took a deep breath. "Neville," he began, locking eyes with the boy. "Would *you* want to live like that? When you can't remember your own son, you own parents, who you *are*?"

"No," Neville said glumly. He paused, and seemed to be calming himself "But what can *I* do?"

"Let them go," Harry replied. "I know that it is hard, but you need to stop thinking that they'll ever come back. In this situation, hope is the deadliest of poisons."

"I know," Neville said. "I've known for a while...but I can't tell Gran that, she'd kill me, say I was dishonoring their memories."

"Unlike you, Neville, she *knew* them. One was her son, the other was the girl he'd been dating since her fifth year. She's never going to be able to give up on them. You don't have to be that way. Accept who you are, and strive to be the best you can be," Harry implored.

"But...wow," he mumbled. "I've been *stupid*," he said dejectedly.

"No, you haven't been *stupid*," Harry replied. "You've been acting your age. Trust me, there is nothing wrong with that. You don't have to look at the way I look at it or an adult looks at it...perhaps the worst

thing about how you've been constantly compared to your parents is that you hear nothing but good things about them."

"But they were good people," Neville protested stubbornly. "You said so yourself."

"So they were," Harry replied. "Were they *perfect*?"

"Of course not," Neville said dismissively.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Oh really? Tell me something stupid that one of them did, then?"

Neville opened his mouth to speak, then closed it abruptly. He *couldn't*. Harry knew that Augusta had likely never uttered a word that in anyway degraded her son and his wife, and taught Neville to dismiss those who did as ignorant.

"I don't know," he admitted. "Is that what you've been trying to tell me?"

Harry nodded.

Neville frowned. "Couldn't you have just said it up front? Instead of making me feel bad?"

Harry gave him a sly smile. "I'm a Slytherin, Neville. I don't operate like that. Besides, doesn't it feel better that you figured it out by yourself?" He sobered. "That's just part of what I'm trying to get you to understand, though," he added.

"Why are you doing this?" Neville asked abruptly. "Why do you care so much about making me believe this?"

"Because I believe in *you*," Harry explained. "And because I feel a connection to you that I don't feel with anyone else. We're both war orphans, Neville, even if your parents still eat, sleep, and breathe. And we've both had to deal with living in the shadows of our parents. Snape hated me on sight because he assumed that I was like my father. You've gotten down on yourself when you've done something

that your perfect parents wouldn't have done, so much that you've accepted you can never be anything important."

"What about you?" Neville asked. "There's something...*strange* about you, Harry. It's like you are trying to play a role, to be a leader at thirteen because the wizarding world expects you to. I've heard some of the stuff you talk to the Slytherins about, and Ron says enough truthful information to give me a general idea...are you trying to be what your guardian was?"

Harry's first inclination was to deny the implication. His first priority was the Prophecy, and that was driving his life at the moment. But it was true that in the past he'd sought to emulate Daphne. Children often tried to be like the parent they were closest to, he'd heard, and because Daphne was the only parent he'd ever known, he probably had been heavily influenced by her. *Especially back when I thought of her as a sad but almost perfect woman and the best mother a person could hope for. Those were childish fantasies, nothing more. Daphne is flawed in ways that most can't even imagine.* "I suppose you might be right," he admitted. "There's something else, though," he added, trying to make it clear that the subject was closed.

Neville frowned, and seemed to be debating something. Blushing, he asked sheepishly, "Could you help with Professor Snape's Potions essay? I don't understand about half the uses of newt eyes."

Harry smiled. "No problem." He shifted over as Neville pulled out a number of papers and his Potions text.

"So anyway," Neville began, "are newt eyes the ingredient that causes the potion to become thicker, or do they balance out the reaction?"

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*"Bloody Hell!"* Harry exclaimed, frantically fanning at the flames rapidly consuming his robes. Ginny provided a solution, hitting him with a Drenching Charm. His robes now both sodden *and* singed, he stared in amazement at his best friend, who had just cast a Burning Hex that had destroyed his shield with impunity. "What was *that?*"

"It *wasn't* a Burning Hex, that's for sure," Ginny said softly. She eyed his damaged clothing. "Hope you didn't have anything valuable in there...and sorry for getting you all wet," she said sheepishly.

"It's fine," Harry insisted, examining his robes and the skin underneath them to insure that there were no severe burns. Somehow, he'd avoided anything serious. He scratched his wet head. "Hermione, care to explain how exactly you did *that*?"

His friend was frozen, staring at her wand in a kind of mute horror. "*I don't know*," she whispered. "I didn't do *anything* differently, I just cast the spell...and you heard the incantation and saw the wand movement; I didn't do anything *unusual*."

"Hermione, are you *really* peeved at Harry for something?" Ginny asked, her eyes narrowing. "Because I remember hearing that spells can sometimes be supercharged by strong emotions...and if that's the case, I think Harry deserves to know why you tried to *kill* him."

Hermione glared at her friend. "I think *nothing* of the sort," she protested. "I just cast it, and..."

Harry saw that the new robes he'd thought about had appeared on a nearby table. A thought later, and so did a changing screen. He stepped behind it, then, feeling mischievous, poked his head out. "No peeking," he said, grinning cheekily at Ginny.

In the past, the redhead would have turned red as a tomato and likely fled the area. As further proof that she'd gotten over her childhood crush, she pinked slightly, but more importantly, sent him a withering glare, then picked up her teacup and threw it at him. He ducked back behind the screen as it shattered against the wall. He decided not to push his luck, and changed into his new robes.

Ginny was still glaring at him when he emerged, eyeing the shattered teacup. The Room had already provided a new one.

Harry gave her an apologetic look. "Sorry," Harry said earnestly. "That was uncalled for."

"It's not as if there's anything good to see," Ginny snapped back pointedly. Harry was about to issue a retort when Hermione, who to this point had been still trying to process what had happened, abruptly burst out laughing. Both of them stared at her until she stopped, coughing loudly.

Before Harry could ask, she changed the subject. "I'll try it again," she suggested, not looking at either of them, blushing slightly for reasons that Harry couldn't fathom. She aimed at the far wall. "*Incendio!*"

A jet of blue light shot from the wand and flames momentarily erupted as it struck the stone surface. They faded quickly, leaving the wall slightly singed. But while it was slightly more powerful than Harry had seen from her before, it was nothing like the fireball that might have roasted him alive if not for his shield and quick reflexes. Most shocking was that it had actually penetrated the shield, going directly through the barrier as well as around it. He was most lucky to have avoided any major burns, though he might have a few blisters here and there. Ginny had reacted quickly.

"Harry, have you ever read about anything like this?" Hermione asked softly, her voice full of concern.

Harry shrugged, his calm, unconcerned expression belying the rapid palpitations of his heart. "You're always been good with fire-related spells; that blue-flame charm is your specialty..." he reasoned. He looked her in the eyes. "You've got to *relax*, though. I'm *fine*."

"I almost *killed* you," Hermione whispered slightly. Harry couldn't keep from wincing, though it wasn't from the reality of Hermione's statement. It was from his own memories of nearly shattering Tonks' skull with a supercharged Striking Curse. *But Hermione can't have gained that much power...there's no reason for it, nor has it manifested itself at any other time this year.*

"Why don't you try again?" Ginny suggested. "See what happens."

"No," Hermione insisted. "I don't want that to happen again."

"Then how will we know if it's a problem?" Harry asked, leaning against a wall. "It could just be a freak occurrence, but it could be something important. You *are* a pretty powerful witch, Hermione."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, looking puzzled.

Harry stared in amazement at her. "I'm not saying you are a budding Sorceress or anything, but you are definitely above-average for your age. Considering that you are Muggle-Born, that's remarkable...simply because you have only been using magic for a little over two years."

Hermione blushed slightly. "I just thought I was smarter," she admitted sheepishly.

Ginny clapped her on the shoulder. "Trust me, you are that too."

Harry dropped into a dueling stance, knees slightly bent, his eyes narrowed at his opponent. Hermione reluctantly mirrored him, swallowing hard as she leveled her wand. "*Percutio!*" she cast quickly. Harry threw up a shield and the spell was reflected into the ceiling with a shower of sparks.

He fired off two spells. First, he cast a Blinding Curse, followed by a Blasting Curse. The incantation for the former was only two syllables. Hermione's hastily conjured shield spluttered and died after deflecting the hex into the floor, but she was unprotected as the latter curse flew at her. She tried to dive but the curse still caught her in the left ankle, and she hit the ground hard. Harry's third spell, a Disarming Charm, launched her wand over his shoulder, as he had already run over to his downed friend.

Hermione groaned in pain, clutching her ankle. Harry feared it might be broken, and while Madam Pomfrey would mend it in an instant, he didn't fancy trying to explain exactly how it had happened. His fears were soothed as Hermione struggled to her feet. It appeared it might just be a bad bruise. Harry had fired the spell in a hurry, and it lacked the regular punch as a result. In addition, the Blasting Curse was most effective against solid objects because the power was directly proportional to the surface area of the target.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked, offering her a hand as she tried to steady herself. She stumbled slightly and fell against him, and he pushed her back up. It was clear that their practice was at an end.

"Ow..." Hermione moaned, bouncing on her good leg. True to her nature, even her injury couldn't hold back her inquisitiveness. "What was it that you did?" she asked, wincing as she did so.

Harry explained his strategy, which suitably impressed both girls. Daphne had explained the concept to him briefly the previous summer, and he'd read up on it. It was, of course, only effective when both combatants were using exclusively verbal magic. One could not rush an incantation; if the syllables were slurred, the spell would not work. But by choosing a shorter incantation, one was almost guaranteed to attack first. One could immediately follow up with a spell of any length to fire at one's now unprotected opponent.

Even in pain, though, Hermione hadn't forgotten about her unexpected burst of power. "Harry, I'm fine," she assured him. "But we need to find out more about what happened."

"You want to duel again?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow as he glanced at her swollen ankle.

Hermione grimaced. "Not really...but how else are we going to find out what happened."

"I'll be ready with the Drenching Charm if needed," Ginny assured them, drawing her wand.

Hermione was still having a bit of trouble standing, so Harry resolved that he would be strictly on the defensive, save maybe a Stinging Hex or something equally minor, until she chose a fire-related spell. Harry hoped that she didn't change her strategy, understanding the importance of having a battle plan for the first part of a duel. After a certain point, one went with their best while searching for weaknesses to exploit.

She started this time, firing a weak Stunner that Harry slapped into the far wall. Gritting her teeth against the pain, her next hex was a Blinding Curse, one which went awry, shooting over Harry's right

shoulder. Harry retaliated with a Stinging Hex that hit her left wrist. She growled slightly, and then loosed a Burning Hex.

A massive plume of blue-white flame burst forth from the tip of her wand. Harry quickly determined that he had no chance of blocking the onrushing inferno, and hit the deck, diving to the stone floor. He felt the pain of his hard impact, but he avoided the deadly fire spell, though it singed the top of his hair. Hermione once more was frozen, but this time, it was awe, not horror. Ginny was looking on, her eyes wide as saucers. "Whoa," she said.

"We've got to tell Professor Dumbledore about this!" Hermione exclaimed. "Because this is definitely not *normal*."

"First, we are getting you to Madam Pomfrey and explaining that you tripped down the stairs," Harry said, interrupting her.

Ginny glared at him. "Can't you think of anything better than *that*?"

"Will you two stop arguing for a second? I'm really worried about this! What if I do it in class? I don't think *that* will go over very well."

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Harry raced through the Entrance Hall, out the large oak doors. It was a cold, blustery October day, and he pulled his cloak closer to himself as he ran. He hurried out onto the grounds, quickly checking his watch. He silently cursed Blaise for delaying him by 'borrowing' his *Monster Book of Monsters*, then making Harry chase him down in the library to get it back. The net result was that he was almost ten minutes late, and Hermione no doubt was going spare wondering where her usually punctual best friend was. *After all, the times that I'm late are usually when something bad has happened.*

He ran across the covered bridge, headed for the east side of the Grounds, his muscles, still sore from his early morning Quidditch practice, protesting the entire way. He'd spoken with Hagrid the previous day, and his friend been rather excited as he told Harry that the day's Care of Magical Creatures class would take place in a paddock on the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest. He spotted a gathering of black-robed figures in the distance, along with the massive silhouette of their teacher. Harry was out of breath when he

skidded to a stop next to Hermione and Blaise, the former shooting an annoyed glare at him and mouthing ‘where have you been?’ Harry shook his head and began to listen to the half-giant.

“...’m sorry the flobberworms weren’t so good, but Professor Dumbledore warned me ‘bout taking the course too fast, this being me first year and all,” Hagrid was saying. He smiled widely, and Harry had a strange sense of foreboding. “But I got sommat real interestin’ today. C’mon, follow me,” he said, waving a trashcan lid-sized hand in the direction of the Forest. There were some anxious whispers, which vanished after they didn’t actually enter the forest. They walked through a small cave which led out onto a caged paddock. Inside were creatures Harry recognized instantly, but had never seen before in person. Hippogriffs resembled large flying horses, complete with a beak and two sets of razor-sharp talons. They eyed the assembling students with a look of disdain.

There were a number of gasps from people that hadn’t seen such a creature before, and Malfoy made a rude comment. “So what exactly *is* that *thing*?” he drawled. “Your best friend?”

“Eard that, five points from Slytherin,” Hagrid grumbled. He turned back to the rest of the class. “Can anybody tell me what these *beautiful* creatures are?” he asked. Several hands shot up, including, of course, Hermione’s. Hagrid pointed at her.

“Hippogriffs are magical creatures that are best described as a cross between a falcon and a horse,” Hermione said matter-of-factly. “They are very proud and intelligent creatures, and easily offended. When offended, they often become violent. They dislike human contact.”

“Good. Five points ter Gryffindor.” Hermione beamed. “Well, these are slightly different from the ones that ‘Ermione was talking ‘bout. These are *tamed* Hippogriffs, so they’re much safer. O’ course, if yeh offend one, they still don’t take kindly to that...well, who wants to be the first to volunteer? Anybody?”

Harry might have volunteered, but he didn’t like the way the creatures kept staring at him, their fiery orange eyes boring into him. Their glimpses were brief, as if not to be noticed, but Harry felt decidedly uneasy. Something stirred within him, and his vision went fuzzy for a

second. He blinked, pulled off his glasses, and was about to clean this when he realized they were spotless. Meanwhile, Ron Weasley of all people had volunteered. No matter how much he disliked the boy, he had to admire his bravery. *Though perhaps they are staring at him like their next meal...*

Nervously, Ron approached the animal, and bowed reluctantly. Buckbeak, a Hippogriff with a fine white coat, bent its knees in the approximation of a bow. Hagrid clapped with joy, then abruptly picked up the Gryffindor and tossed him onto the back of the creature. Harry watched in fascination as Ron clung for dear life, getting a firm hold of the creature's neck just in time as it spread its massive wings and took flight. Most of the class cheered enthusiastically, though Ron didn't exactly look like he was anticipating his next ride. He stumbled as he got off, and his face was slightly green.

"Great, Ron!" Hagrid boomed cheerfully. "Fifteen points ter Gryffindor...now then, there's twelve of them, so partner up and choose one. Remember, bow first, show 'em the respect they want. Approach slowly, and don't say anything stupid, 'cause they can hear yeh."

Hermione had already moved towards a black-and-white Hippogriff. The creature immediately turned to Harry as he moved to follow. He made a note to ask Hagrid in private what distracted or attracted the creatures. He had a feeling they might somehow be sensing the massive reserves of wild magic that Daphne had sealed off in his mind. She had instructed him specifically to do everything in his power to keep his abilities secret. He didn't like to play on his friend's absentmindedness, but Hagrid probably wouldn't make the connection, and would simply be pleased that Harry was showing such interest.

Hermione approached nervously, and Harry could see that her knees were shaking. "Deep breaths," he instructed. "They won't be impressed by fear."

"You try and approach one of these things," she shot back. But never one to back away from a challenge, she moved forward. She stopped as soon as the Hippogriff diverted its attention from Harry to her, and

bowed slightly. The Hippogriff wasted no time in returning the gesture. Hermione cautiously approached, and began to stroke the feathers on the creature's neck. It crooned in pleasure as Hermione found a good spot. But she had no intentions of riding the beast, and backed away slowly.

Harry took a deep breath and began to move forward, forcing himself to keep eye contact and trying not to blink. He slowly bent his back, tensing the muscles in his right arm as he prepared to arm himself if need be. *For whatever good that will do...*

The Hippogriff advanced a few steps, but stopped, and bowed slightly, almost reluctantly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Nott watching him closely, as he absently pet the coat of the chestnut. He turned his eyes back almost instantly to the Hippogriff, whose eyes seemed to be becoming brighter. As he moved forward, arms still at his side, he felt a small, almost undetectable sensation, and stopped, just a foot from the creature. As he stared into the black-and-white Hippogriff's eyes, his magic slipped around Daphne's barrier, *sniffing* at the winged horse curiously...

At that instant, the creature reared back, letting out a loud cry of alarm. Time seemed to slow as Harry raced against the instinctual reaction of the beast. His wrist cocked slowly as a razor-sharp talon descended towards his unprotected midsection. His left arm instinctually came up to block the claws...

He heard the fabric of his robes tear. He felt the right talon break the skin just below his left shoulder. He felt the piercing pain as the claw raked across his skin, slicing him open from collar-bone to navel. His body instinctually jerked backwards, which perhaps kept the Hippogriff from digging into his stomach, but the damage was done. He heard Hermione's shriek of alarm as it echoed through his eardrums, heard several other screams as he felt his back hit the dirt, leaving him lying almost directly beneath the still-crazed creature. He looked up in shock and disbelief as the creature lunged again, claws reaching for his downed form, one dripping with his blood.

Time sped back up...

The creature jerked backwards as none other than Neville Longbottom seized the reigns of the Hippogriff, undoubtedly saving the Slytherin's life. Hagrid arrived to aid him just as Harry felt warmth began to soak his clothing. His vision was darkening, and he seemed to be deaf. He saw Hermione draw her wand and without thinking cast a Healing Spell she'd learned from a book only yesterday.

Harry could dimly hear the excited shouting off the class, the pounding of Hagrid's massive feet as he ran over to his student, and Hermione's continued cries for help...

His vision darkened as if he was being pulled down into a tunnel, and he knew no more.

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*Would whoever is sobbing and blowing his nose please SHUT UP?* he yelled mentally, aware that no one could hear him. He didn't know where he was, what he was doing here, why he couldn't see, or when it would end. All he knew was that his name was Harry Potter, he lived with Daphne Dressler, he'd been late for his Care of Magical Creatures class...

His memories came racing back to him, and with the jolt of adrenaline, his eyes flew open. They closed almost as fast, blinded by the bright light around him. Slowly, he opened them again, and tried to sit up. He met resistance, and began to panic. He pushed back, but then heard a frantic voice telling him to calm down, that he was badly injured and wasn't supposed to get out of bed. Another female voice, this one higher-pitched, joined the first, and he stopped struggling. Someone placed his glasses over his eyes, and he blinked as the world came into focus. Staring back at him was Ginny Weasley, looking pale and anxious. "Harry?" she asked. Harry heard Hermione yelling for Madam Pomfrey in the background, and tried to sit up again. Ginny recognized what he was trying to do and tried to prop him upright.

Madam Pomfrey, looking tired and harassed, came into view. "Mr. Potter," she snapped. "*Lie down.*"

Harry complied, relaxing his body and sliding back into a horizontal position. She stopped him short, tipping his head backwards as she

held a potion in front of her. He opened his mouth and she slowly poured in the contents of the vial. It was bitter, but he'd had worse.

There was another loud sob and a sound like a fog horn as Hagrid blew his nose again. Harry couldn't see him, as he was hunched over, sitting on two of the beds, but he didn't look very good. "What happened?" he asked, still trying to remember how he'd gotten here.

"Yeh see," Hagrid said miserably, "He don't even *remember*," he sobbed miserably.

"You were...attacked by a Hippogriff," Hermione said, taking a seat on the next bed. She glanced over at her teacher as she chose her words carefully. Harry wasn't sure there was any other way to say it, and Hagrid was about as upset as he could get already.

"I thought you were dead," Ginny admitted, blushing slightly. "I was just being silly."

"Not at all, dear," Madam Pomfrey interjected. "If not for Miss Granger's unexpected prowess at Healing, you might be." She gave Hagrid a half-hearted glare. Obviously, she was fighting her protective instincts. Hagrid didn't need any reminders that he'd done anything stupid.

Another fog horn. "Hagrid offered to resign," Ginny whispered. "Professor Dumbledore wouldn't let him." That made sense to Harry, and he had to admit that this really wasn't Hagrid's fault. The creature had somehow detected his untamed power and been terribly frightened by it. Hippogriffs were Light creatures, and it seemed even more likely now that Harry's new magic still carried with it the taint of Tom Riddle. It was something he'd need to talk about with both Daphne and Dumbledore. A scary thought suddenly came to mind.

"Nothing else happened, right?" he asked, his voice a hoarse whisper. As if to remedy this, Madam Pomfrey came over with a glass of water. He sat up slightly and drank greedily before lying down. He could feel that almost his entire torso was covered in bandages underneath his pajamas and hospital gown.

Hermione frowned at him. She looked alarmingly suspicious. *Bloody hell, does anything get by her?* “What do you mean by that?” she asked with a slight edge. “Is nearly *dying* not enough for you?”

Harry was shocked, and it looked like Hermione instantly thought better of what she had said. “*Hermione!*” Ginny gasped, glaring angrily.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted. “That didn’t come out right. I’ve just been so worried about you.”

“Really?” a male voice said. “I thought you might have been losing your touch...pity...” Blaise Zabini said. Harry was happy to see him, if only for the distraction. “You doing alright, Potter?” he asked.

Harry smiled grimly. “Dunno, I can’t get up. That’s probably not a good thing.”

“I’d say not,” Blaise admitted. He smiled, walking over to stand next to the bed. He bent down and whispered, “*you’d best get well soon; Malfoy’s threatening to take your job.*” Harry groaned.

“*Boys!*” Hermione snapped angrily. “Do either one of you have any care for how close Harry came to *dying*? ”

Blaise shrugged. “Hadn’t thought about it much, to be honest...you, Harry?”

He smiled back at him, knowing the response he wanted. He much preferred Blaise’s offhanded way of dealing with things. It was far less depressing. “Haven’t had much time for thinking, really.”

“*You arrogant little-*”

“Miss Granger! Mister Zabini! OUT!” Madam Pomfrey bellowed, pointing a finger at the door. Blaise wilted and obediently followed, looking defeated. *She could silence banshees if they were disturbing the rest of her patients,* Harry thought.

“No,” Hermione protested. “I’m staying.” It sobered Harry slightly when he realized the implications of Hermione standing up to an adult.

She was obviously far more concerned with him, and he'd been more or less mocking her. She returned Madam Pomfrey's stern glare with one of her own. Whether it was because she was too tired to argue or simply trusted the girl's good nature and adherence to the rules was unknown, but she relented.

"Fine," she snapped. "Mr. Potter, you are going to be here for a while, so get comfortably. You've been out for a day and a half, and lost a great deal of blood, so I'm going to be giving you regular Blood-Replenishing potions."

Harry nodded in understanding and the Hogwarts Matron departed, muttering about regular patients and disruptive students. Harry realized that Hermione was standing off to the side awkwardly. He sighed. "You know, Hermione, if I handled every near-death experience the way you wanted me too, I'd be living a rather depressing existence."

"Well maybe you'd stop getting into those situations, then," she snapped back huffily.

"It's not *his* fault," Ginny protested. "How was he supposed to know that his Hippogriff would *attack* him?"

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. She turned to him, biting her lower lip. "Do you have any ideas?"

"No," Harry lied. In fact, he was almost certain he knew what had caused the creature to react in such a way. What he didn't know was what he could do about it, or about any other possible consequences of his untamed power. He needed to have a conversation with Dumbledore. Surely he had had to deal with such things before, or would at least be able to relate.

Another fog horn. "Hagrid, I'm alright," Harry assured him, speaking loudly as to not be drowned out by the man's racking sobs.

"Yeh almost died!" Hagrid moaned. "That's two years outta three!"

"The first time wasn't your fault," Harry insisted. "If you'd been with us, he would have gotten you too. The important thing was that you took Hermione and I to safety."

Hagrid didn't seem to be listening, though the sobs stopped. He turned back to Hermione, who glanced over her shoulder. "It's just too much, Harry," she whispered. "Between what happened when we were dueling and this, *and* the fact that you've got a mass murderer after you, you've got to forgive me if I'm just a *bit* concerned about you right now!"

Harry winced. The fact that Sirius Black was supposedly hunting him had escaped his mind. "Well, I'm safe up here," he replied. "You won't have to worry for a few days."

"For whatever *that's* worth," Ginny reminded him. "I might be showing it a little less than Hermione, but it scares *me* to death every time something happens to you."

Guilt hammered down on him in waves, but he surprised himself by fighting it. He understood his friend's worry and anxiety, but he simply couldn't allow himself to think like that. He had a great task before him, and he would accomplish nothing by 'playing it safe.' *Even Daphne knows that, and she would do anything to protect me.*

"We do need to speak to Dumbledore," Harry admitted. "I've got to admit I'm concerned about what happened when Hermione and I dueled. There's something else I need to address, as well." He'd hoped that the two of them might be distracted enough to leave it at that, but it was a foolish hope.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, frowning at him, her eyes narrowing. Harry chastised himself as he realized that he'd backed himself into a corner. *How to explain this without telling them the truth and not damaging our relationship...*

Harry took a deep breath. "Something happened in the Chamber that neither of you two know about. In fact, there are only four people that know about it. I can't tell you now, for both your and my safety."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Ginny demanded angrily. "You don't trust us?"

Hermione answered for him. "No, but neither one of us has any Occlumency training...but you just started, didn't you?"

Harry shook his head. "I've been learning since August, but Daphne has placed mental barriers in my mind. I *swear* that I will tell you *when it's safe*, but for now, this needs to remain secret. Do you understand?" Though they didn't know it, he was actually referring to two different secrets. One, of course, being the reserves of untamed and uncontrollable magic. The other being the information about the Prophecy.

"How can we, though?" Ginny asked. "You're stuck in bed for at least a week. I think Madam Pomfrey mentioned some special property of a Hippogriff's talons that make the wounds they inflict heal very slowly." Hermione nodded in agreement.

"Then we'll wait a week," Harry supposed. "The day after Halloween?"

Hermione shrugged. "We'll have to get our story straight. Professor Dumbledore is a rather busy man...shouldn't Daphne be there as well?"

Harry surprised himself by shaking his head without a thought. "She has enough on her mind, what with tracking Black, applying for a teaching job with the Aurors, and training. Dumbledore will tell us what to do." *After all, it'd be nice to know if my power will cause any more dangerous magical creatures to savage me...*

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The next week was pure torture from Harry's perspective. His healing was progressing, and finally, four days later, Madam Pomfrey allowed him to sit up for short periods of time. The claws hadn't badly damaged any internal organs, but he'd have a number of scars to add to his ever growing collection. Besides the infamous one on his forehead, he had numerous ones from various minor dueling injuries, remnants of larger wounds he assumed he'd received in the beating

that Riddle had taken in his body from Daphne, and one on his right arm he'd had since the age of five. He received that one by trying to relocate an owl's nest. It was *not* the smartest thing he'd ever done.

Next to his bed was a large pile of textbooks and pieces of parchment, on which were the assignments he had missed in various stages of completion. Hermione and Blaise had managed to cover all of his classes. Ginny visited him whenever she could. His injuries had, in some convoluted way, actually benefited her. Short a Chaser after Malfoy had usurped his Seeker position, Pucey had chosen her as his replacement.

Luna Lovegood had also stopped by, and they'd had an interesting conversation about human nature. At least, it had been interesting at the time. Between Luna's nonsensical statements and vague assertions, and Harry's boredom, in hindsight, he was amazed that he had found the conversation intriguing in anyway whatsoever. Luna had said one thing that he was still thinking about. "Sometimes, people are frightened not just by what a person does, but what they *could* do...they are afraid of potential to do bad things. I think that's stupid. After all, I have the potential to be many things. I could discover the cure for Dragon Pox...or I could invent a new disease and make a lot of people die. I think people are just jealous that you have the potential to be *greater* than them...for better or for worse..."

The rest of her dialogue had involved a number of examples with Crumple-Horned Snorkacks and Nargles. But as obvious as Luna's statement was, it also offered an explanation for why the Hippogriff, which Hagrid had named Onyx, had attacked him. *It, as a Light creature, is frightened of the Dark Magic that I contain within me. Somehow, that magic reached out to it when we kept eye contact. It sensed Riddle inside of me, and it panicked.*

Harry rolled over and stared out over the Grounds. The Quidditch game had started about an hour ago, Gryffindor vs. Slytherin. Weasley against Weasley(s). Hermione had offered to stay with him, but he'd insisted that she support Ginny, who was rather anxious. The cheers seemed to have died down, or at least, he couldn't hear them through the closed window.

He went back to work, using his wand to levitate his Charms textbook. Their assignment was a charm that Hermione had been using since the first week of her first year, the Warming Charm.

*The Warming Charm, along with its opposite, the Cooling Charm, is a simple spell with many practical uses. As well as providing warmth to any part of the body, a wizard or witch can heat tea or any other kind of liquid. Warming Charms can be cast to take effect in a specific area or can be cast on the person. The wand movements, as follow, are quite simple. A small upward flick of the wrist...*

“My, my, I’d expect our Seeker to be a bit more interested in the outcome of the game,” an unfamiliar voice commented. He set the book down and met the dark, suspicious eyes of Anne Grunitch. Her dark brown hair was tied back in a ponytail to keep it out of her face during the match. The girl was still wearing her green and silver Quidditch Robes, and her cheeks were pink from the cold. From the downcast look on her face, Harry figured the news wasn’t good.”

“Pardon me if I don’t want to think about what I’d *rather* be doing...how badly did we lose?”

Anne blinked. “You’re better than I thought,” she said quietly. She scowled. “We were slaughtered.”

Harry sighed. “And you are delivering this news because?”

“What do you think?” she snapped. “Weasley played like dragon dung and Granger’s trying to calm her down.”

Harry closed his eyes. Somehow, he’d anticipated this. “Was she really *that* bad?”

Anne nodded grimly, and then hesitated. “Well, it’s a toss up between her and Montague, but Pucey was screaming at *her*. She scored forty points, but also missed six passes, dropped the ball twice, and refused to execute a Suicide Sprint.”

Harry glared at her. The Suicide Sprint was a favorite of Flint’s. It was a tactic designed to jump-start a struggling offense by diverting the attention of the opposing Beaters. One of the Chasers, normally the

fastest, would fly straight at one of both of the Beaters, narrowly avoiding a collision, and giving the Chaser's Beaters a chance to swoop in and regain control while the other two Chasers made a run at the goal. The strategy worked most of the time for two reasons. One, when the time was chosen properly, the attacker had the advantage of surprise. Second, the Beaters were normally reluctant to hit the charging Chaser at such close range. *And Fred and George wouldn't dream of hitting Ginny at point-blank range. And as long as she avoids an actual collision, it's completely legal. Fuck you Adrian.* "Did you really expect her to? They are her *brothers* after all!"

Anne shrugged. "I thought it was rather tactless, but I think Pucey was just desperate. Their Chasers jumped all over Tracey, and they were off to a big lead. Malfoy simply doesn't have your focus or vision and is a dreadful Seeker. I think I saw the Snitch a couple more time than he did. This one was decided by the Chasers, and they've got three good ones."

Harry nodded in agreement. "Well, tell Pucey I'll be able to fly against Ravenclaw."

"Trust me, he knows; I don't think he's ever appreciated having you on the team as much as he did today...so you got attacked by something in Care of Magical Creatures?"

Harry winced at the memory. "Yeah...a Hippogriff."

Anne nodded, obviously understanding. "What'd you do, insult it?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know," he admitted honestly. "The thing just reared back and attacked me...and I'm not quite *that* stupid...change of subject, though: how was *your* first match?"

Anne smiled widely, and Harry could see the genuine glee shining through her tough exterior. "Great. I love hitting Bludgers. Expect me to be getting quite a few death glares from the Gryffindor Chasers and Weasley. I broke Bell's nose."

Harry grimaced. "She won't be thanking you for that...it was a clean hit?"

Anne grinned again, but this time, it was more predatory. “There’s no cheating in Quidditch, Potter. Only bending the rules.”

Despite himself, Harry smiled back at her. Quidditch brought out a competitive instinct in him that made him overlook his normal morals and codes of conduct from time to time. That, combined with his Slytherin traits, made it quite easy to congratulate Anne on breaking the rules without getting caught. *Besides, it’s just a game. One that I and nearly everyone else absolutely loves, but just a game. There’s no cheating in a real battle, just intelligent tactics.* “Thanks for stopping by, Anne. Broke the monotony a bit.”

“Glad to be of service,” the girl replied cheerfully. “I’ll chase down Ginny and tell her that you haven’t cut all ties to her then?”

Harry smiled. “Please.”

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Harry stood on shaking legs with Madam Pomfrey holding his shoulders steady. Once he had regained his balance, she let go. She crossed in front of him and gave him a stern glare. “You are to report to me every morning to receive your potions and a change of bandages. Do *not* remove those bandages except to shower or bathe, and rinse the wound when you do. And for Merlin’s Sake, Harry, *please* take better care of yourself. I’ve got it in mind to *reserve* a hospital bed for you; you’re here frequently enough.” She paused, before continuing. “Do *not* exert yourself too much; despite the Strengthening Potions, you’ll still tire easily.”

Harry smiled hopefully. “Can I go to the Halloween Feast?”

The Hogwarts Matron shook her head. “I’m afraid not. I want you to get a good night’s sleep in your own bed, otherwise I’m keeping you here. You’ve been through quite an ordeal, Mister Potter, and the only reason I’m letting you out is because Professor Dumbledore asked me too. I don’t know why, so please don’t ask.”

“Alright, I understand,” Harry replied, leaning back against the bed and yawning tiredly.

"See that? You'll fall asleep on your feet. Would you like me to escort you down to the dungeons? The last thing I need is for you to miss a step and break your neck falling down the stairs!"

Harry raised his hands. "I'll be fine. *Trust me.*"

Madam Pomfrey looked very reluctant, but sighed. "Alright, off you go. No more visits for at least two weeks, understood?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Go."

Harry left the Hospital Wing for the first time in week and instantly felt better. He considered for a moment ignoring Madam Pomfrey's instructions and sneaking in for the last part of the Feast, but thought better of it. She'd find out, and probably keep him in there for *another* week. He also remembered he'd need to have a House-Elf move the massive pile of books. *Maybe he'll be useful after all...*

"Dobby?" he called.

With a CRACK, the bedraggled, green-grey skinned elf appeared in front of him, his tennis ball-sized green eyes sparkling with anticipation. "Master Harry Potter called Dobby?"

Harry forced a smile, though with considerably less effort than it usually took. He didn't *hate* Dobby; one had to be truly cold-hearted to do that. Dobby meant *very* well, was extremely loyal, reliable, and enthusiastic. Far *too* enthusiastic. "Yes, Dobby, I did...have you spoken to Daphne lately?"

"Dobby has, sir," he explained. "Mistress Daphne Dressler was asking Dobby to find out what happened to Harry Potter...Mistress was not very happy with Mister Hagrid when Mistress discovered that Mister Harry Potter had been hurt by big, bad Hippogriff. Mistress Daphne Dressler said that Mister Hagrid should-

"That's enough, Dobby," Harry said, cutting him off. He frowned as he processed what the elf had said. Daphne was understandably unhappy that Harry had been badly injured, but he had hoped that

she wouldn't direct the blame at Hagrid. The man clearly regretted...whatever he had done wrong. *I suppose he thinks he let his enthusiasm get the better of him. Which is unfortunate for two reasons: one, the reason that I was injured has nothing to do with the nature of a Hippogriff, and two, we'll be back to studying miserably boring creatures like Flobberworms.*

"Dobby is sorry, sir."

Harry suddenly remembered why he had summoned the elf in the first place. "Dobby, I left my books beside my bed in the Hospital Wing. Might you bring them back to my room?"

Dobby nodded energetically. "Of course, sir. I will be doing it right away!" He vanished with a CRACK. *I can only hope he doesn't provoke the ire of Madam Pomfrey by making too much noise. He is useful, even if he's also completely barmy.*

Harry proceeded down several sets of staircases into the Entrance Hall. He looked longingly at the corridor that led into the Great Hall, where Ginny, Hermione, and Blaise were no doubt enjoying the festivities. He could hear the dull roar of excited chatter, explosions, and music. *That makes it three years in a row. Halloween is a cursed day for me...and my family.*

He blinked and regained focus, turning towards the entrance of the dungeons. He stopped for a moment, then made the final decision that he would *not* risk another horrifically boring week in the Hospital Wing, and descended into the bowels of the castle.

The dungeons were dark, as usual, lit only by a few torches that never seemed to go out. It was dank, gloomy, and unnerving. *Pull yourself together, Potter. Even Daphne doesn't jump at every shadow, every spooked rat. Sirius Black is not hiding in the dungeons.*

Nonetheless, he sped up his pace, but still paid close attention to everything in front of him. He saw nothing.

What he *didn't* see was what was occurring behind him. Had he been aware, he might have seen a bear-like black dog, hidden deep in the shadows, soundlessly morph into a tall man in ragged clothing. The

Animagus raised a stolen wand, a reluctant hex on his lips. He waited for his moment...

Harry heard a dull *BOOM* in the distance, coming from the direction of the Great Hall. He smiled sadly, guessing that it was probably the handiwork of one of the Weasley twins.

In that moment, Sirius struck. “*Stupefy!*”

Harry was in motion the moment he heard the word, but it was *far* too late. His wand remained in his holster as the red jet of light hit him in the back.

His world vanished into a dark abyss.

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A/N: Ha! A cliffie... after the longest lag in updating I've had yet. I'm much busier than I have been, so I have less time for this thing. Still, I've got the main sequence of events layed out for the rest of this book.

Bunch of stuff happened in this chapter.

First, if Harry is really seeming way too mature and worldly, keep in mind that he's been through quite a lot and he's always been very good at reading people. His 'connection' with Neville is something born out of sympathy, versus magical bond or anything like that. It should be obvious that Harry sees a great deal of potential in Neville, and that he is trying to get him to tap into that potential and overcome his lack of self-confidence. If he seems rather rude and inconsiderate, he's doing it because he's decided it's the only way he can get through to the boy.

Hermione's power is going to require a great deal of explanation, and I'm going to let the characters do the honors. She is *not* an elemental, or any super-powerful being. She *is* of above-average talent and well-above-average skill. And I can do that because it's *my* AU, and I am *not* bound by canon.

I wouldn't assume anything about how Harry will eventually defeat Voldemort, especially because I haven't figured it out yet. Nor have I

decided if he'll survive. I will tell you this: I intend to kill a large number of main characters. The rule of thumb is this. In 5-6, everyone except Harry and Voldemort is in 'mortal peril.' In seven, everyone has a chance of taking a Killing Curse in the face...or some more gruesome and spectacular manner of death. Just a warning.

Yes, I'm slowly beginning to push Harry and Ginny together. Both are equally clueless, mostly because neither one of them have any feelings at this point. This thing is going to develop *slowly*, though Harry will begin to experience the joys of puberty at some point. His mature ideas and attitude won't spare him *that*.

A key issue between Harry and Hermione is her compassion and anxiety versus his insistence on seeing everything in perspective. You can imagine the possibilities in the coming war.

I didn't have Harry attacked by a hippogriff because I like injuring him. Harry's speculations are on the right track. There is a great deal of his power yet to be explained.

Next chappie will have a confrontation between Daphne and Remus. Oh I will savor the angst goodness.

## Chapter 12: Untimely Reunions

Sirius winced as he saw Harry crash headlong into the nearby wall. *I think I overdid it a little.* His Godson slumped against the stone, sliding down until he was lying prone in front of the wall. His nose appeared to be broken, and was bleeding freely. He also had a cut on his forehead.

Sirius had never been good with Healing spells, but he didn't want Harry dripping blood the entire way out of the castle. He was fairly certain that only three people knew about the hidden cave underneath the eastern part of the lake into the lower dungeons. He'd gotten lost more than once. *What I would do for the Marauder's Map...but that bloody squib took it...*

"*Episkey,*" he cast, crossing his fingers as he did so. His little-used Healing skills were up to the job, and with a flicker of blue light, his Godson's nose healed and reset itself. The difficult task completed, he quickly healed the gash on Harry's forehead.

Now, he just needed to find a way out. He'd managed to get close to the lake and the hidden tunnel by using his dog form. He had no doubt Daphne would have told the Aurors what to look for, but the Dementors were blind, and probably didn't know what a dog *felt* like...or perhaps the proper word was *tasted* like.

He picked his Godson up off the ground. The boy was rather heavy, though Sirius guessed it was more because of his atrophied muscles than Harry's weight. The kid was in fine physical condition. *Better than James at this age, that's for sure. Even if James was pretty slim, he didn't do much in the way of unnecessary movement. Got him in trouble a bit when his Quidditch skills slipped.*

Refocusing, Sirius tried to formulate a plan; he needed to move *fast*. Undoubtedly, the Halloween Feast was coming to an end, and all the little Slytherins would be coming down to get ready for bed. *And Snivellus with them...*

Sirius began to run deeper into the dungeons, trying to retrace his steps. As a dog, he could use his sense of smell and hearing to seek

out humans, and thus, find a way out of the maze-like Lower Dungeons. Sirius stopped, looking around frantically.

He never saw who was waiting for him, hiding in the shadows like the bat he was. All he saw was the ever-lengthening sliver of white light out of the corner of his eye. His reflexes, built up in the years of ferocious combat in the First War, had not been completely dulled by years in Azkaban. He ducked, fighting the urge to dive to the floor, and tried to shift Harry's weight so that he could get his wand up and defend himself from the unseen attacker.

"Drop the boy," a hated, silky voice said from the shadows. "Now."

"Always the coward, aren't you, Snivellus? Come out and fight like a man!" Sirius yelled, his heart racing as he tried to maintain his composure. He had to keep moving, turning around with jerky movements as he sought to prevent his arch nemesis from getting behind him.

"Perhaps, Black. Yet, I survived the same number of battles as you did. Perhaps more."

"As a Death Eater, yes," Sirius spat back.

"What exactly is *that* supposed to mean? No matter...Drop the boy, Black," Snape's disembodied voice repeated, a cold rage burning beneath the words.

"He's my Godson, Snivellus, I'm taking him away!"

"So you claim, Black. At least I never betrayed those I loved. I'm sure it would kill Potter to hear than *you* betrayed them."

"I didn't!" Sirius protested loudly. "*Stupefy!*" The red jet of his Stunning Spell flew out into the darkness, and sparks flew where it contacted the wall.

"Pathetic, Black," Snape said softly, his voice now seeming to come from behind. Sirius spun around, thrusting his wand forward. Suddenly, from behind him, he felt danger, and dropped the floor just

in time to avoid another deadly spell, one that came in at an angle. A Slashing Curse.

For the first time in a while, Sirius was happy to have been born a Black. While few Seers came out of that family, a number of them had also been born with the ability to sense danger. Sirius was one of them. So was Bellatrix, a fact that may have been the key to her success. She was not one to hang back, but one to attack viciously, hurling Cruciatus Curses to incapacitate her foes and killing them slowly when she had enough time.

As he dove, Harry's body slipped out of his hands, and Sirius almost landed on top of him. Realizing he had no chance while still carrying the boy, Sirius got back up, aiming in the direction that the spell had come from. "Still using Dark Magic, Snivellus?"

"Oh, yes, Black," Snape said with relish. "Just like your Godson."

"You're lying, Snivellus. That's what slimy Slytherins like you do!" Sirius said, a hint of desperation entering his voice.

"From a certain point of view, that's accurate. We are far better than you give us credit for, and lying is certainly one of our tools. Potter is improving, steadily. He's a sharp one, Black, a credit to my House."

"*SHUT UP!*" Sirius screamed. "*DISCERPO!*" A massive Severing Curse lanced out of his wand, but hit nothing but air before it cut a groove into the opposite wall. Sirius was shocked that he'd used a Dark curse so easily. *That bloody bastard! He's laughing!*

Snape was indeed laughing. The strange acoustics of the dungeon made it sound as if his voice was everywhere at once. Though it was possible Snivellus was using a spell to create that effect, Sirius still felt a bead of sweat drip down his neck, and he wiped at his wet brow. "You ready to fight yet, Snivellus?"

"Of course not, Black, I'm just waiting for the show to start. You may be able to evade the Dementors in dog form, but they are probably pounding at the gates to get at you now. As much as I would *love* to finish you myself, I am a patient man. Leave the boy, Black, and you *might* live...for now..."

“Never!” Sirius barked. “I’ll never abandon James’s son to you!”

“Noble sentiments, Black...ah, is that the sound of *students* I hear? You have precious little *time*, Black. Flee. You should be grateful; Dressler will certainly not show you such *mercy*.”

“Mercy? You just want to see me Kissed!”

“Ah...*pity*, you’ve discovered my master plan. I *might* curse you into the hell that you deserve, but I have no *wish* to damage Dressler’s *precious* ward. Or to invoke the ire of the Headmaster. *Flee*, Black. Flee like the spineless *mongrel* you are.”

Sirius was raging. He wanted to find Snivellus and beat his head into the stone walls until the floor was *slick* with his blood and brains...*what am I doing?* He asked himself, shocked by his line of thinking. He *hated* Snivellus, but he was thinking like...like a *Dark Wizard*. *Bloody bastard has poisoned my thoughts...but I can’t leave Harry!*

The sounds of laughter and conversation grew louder. *But they won’t come this far into the dungeons.* “You are running out of time, Black. *Expecto Patronum!*”

A silvery-white bat flew out of the darkness, flashing back through the dungeons. Sirius knew that it would reach Dumbledore in seconds. He *had* to leave.

Another flash of light, this time a red spell tinged with blue. An Entrail-Expelling Curse. Sirius dived out of the way. “*I’m sorry, Harry,*” he whispered.

And with the next flash of the still-hidden Snape’s wand, Sirius transformed...

And fled.

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Ginny was met with a frightening sight as she and Blaise stood outside the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room, waiting for the mass of black-and-green clothed Slytherins to thin out. Seconds ago,

there had been a strange flash of white light, which she hoped to ask Harry about. She was under the impression that he was still in the Hospital Wing, anxiously waiting for Madam Pomfrey's approval so that he could finally rejoin his friends.

What she *hadn't* been expecting was for a disoriented looking Harry to be following her Head of House as they approached the group of students. Snape was walking quickly, his strides long and determined. His eyes blazed with rage, and his expression was furious. Ginny gasped and ran over to him. Blaise followed, looking concerned. "What are you doing down here, Harry?" he asked, looking him over. "What happened to you?"

"Sirius Black is what happened to him," Snape said sharply. "Potter assures me that he is physically well, but I will make sure of that. Come," he ordered to the confused-looking Boy-Who-Lived. Harry followed docilely. The way he was walking, Ginny was beginning to wonder if he had a concussion or something like that.

"What happened to Black?" Ginny asked, her eyes still on her friend.

"He fled like the coward he is," Snape answered. "Now move!"

Ginny jumped out of the way, and Blaise stepped back, allowing them passage. "And both of you, get into your dormitory. Potter will live, and you'll see him in the morning, no doubt," Snape said in an irritated voice. "Go!"

Ginny didn't have to be told twice, and quickly said, "Ambition leads to power." The hidden door slid open, and she stepped inside. Blaise followed. But Ginny stopped to take one last glimpse at Harry and he and Snape disappeared, heading for the entrance to the dungeons. *How do you keep getting yourself into these things, Harry? Hermione is going to have kittens!*

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Daphne Dressler burst through the oak doors into Dumbledore's office, abruptly interrupting the meeting that was currently being held. She didn't care, not at all. All she cared about was that her ward had nearly died twice in the space of two weeks. Hagrid wasn't the

brightest pumpkin in the patch, and she suspected something else had contributed to Harry's mauling...but *this*?

"Give me a reason, Albus," she said, stopping in front of his desk, ignoring the stares of the Hogwarts Staff. The only ones absent were Trelawny, who spent most of her time in the Divination Tower, and Filch, who was likely overseeing whatever measures Dumbledore had put in place. Minerva made an indignant noise, but Daphne ignored them. She had warned Dumbledore that if he were unable to protect Harry from harm, she would take him out of Hogwarts. In the past, Dumbledore's failure could be excused...she could hardly blame him for failing to detect something that *she* had missed completely. But she had had enough. Harry was in the Hospital Wing *again*, this time nursing a concussion, having been attacked by Sirius Black in dungeons. It *frightened* her that no one had thought that sending Harry back alone was a bad idea.

"Have you ever heard of *knocking*, Dressler?" Snape asked silkily. "I believe you have interrupted something."

"*Shut it*," she snapped angrily. She didn't have time for his taunting. "How could you let this happen?" she demanded.

Dumbledore raised his hands. "Please, calm yourself, Daphne," he coaxed. "Let us discuss this like civilized human beings. You have a right to be upset—"

"*Upset?*" Daphne snarled, her magic bursting free and permeating the room. She managed to keep her anger tied down...for the moment. Had it been Snape instead of Dumbledore in front of her, it might have been different.

"Daphne, *please!*" Minerva begged. "Calm yourself; you aren't doing Harry any good."

"How else am I supposed to get through to you, Albus?" Daphne demanded. "You have ignored all of my previous warnings. Harry has faced down death far too many times, and it's been under *your watch!*"

"I will not deny that I have made mistakes," Dumbledore said. "But I agree with Minerva. I will speak with you now, but I must insist you speak to me calmly and rationally. The last time you spoke when you were this emotional, you made a dreadful mistake."

Daphne winced at the memory of the Vow of Vengeance. It was rather underhanded of Dumbledore to use that memory, but it was effective. "Fine," she bit out.

"The rest of you are excused. Be vigilant, and calm the students' fears. We will survive this...Severus, please stay behind so that you may clarify the situation. You as well, Minerva."

"I'm staying too," a voice said. Daphne turned to see Remus getting out of his chair, starting towards her.

"Remus..."

"No, Albus," Remus insisted. "I must be included in this conversation."

Albus sighed tiredly. "Very well," he said. "Daphne?"

Daphne took a deep breath. "As soon as Madam Pomfrey clears him, I'm taking him home. I'll give him the education he needs there."

"No!" Remus suddenly yelled. "You can't do that!"

"Remus!" Minerva chastised him. "Control yourself!"

Remus glared at her. "I won't let you," he insisted.

Daphne met his eyes. What she saw alarmed her. Remus's eyes were naturally blue, flashing anger only when the wolf was aroused. His eyes flashed amber. It didn't *have* to be the full moon that aroused the wolf; it could be strong emotions; anger or fear, for example...or certain *instincts*...

"No!" she snarled, her eyes narrowing in fury. "He is not your *cub*, Lupin," she snapped. "You have no right to him! You abandoned him!"

“*SILENCE!*” Dumbledore commanded, his blue eyes icy. Daphne could feel the flow of his magic as it rippled out from him, calming everyone in the room and forcing them to pay attention. Finally, after a long moment, he spoke. “I will *not* have responsible adults such as yourselves screaming at one another like a pair of misbehaving children. You were friends once, and you have the same purpose at heart. We will discuss this in a civilized manner, or we will not discuss it at *all*. Do you understand?” Dumbledore asked. His eyes lingered on Snape for a moment longer, obviously warning him about antagonizing either one of them.

Daphne took a deep breath. “He’s *my* ward,” she said softly, but with a hard edge. “*I* have custody of him, and as he is not yet of age, *I* make the decisions for him...and *I* have judged that he is not *safe* for him to remain at Hogwarts.”

“Have you given a thought to the fact that Harry might want to stay here?” Remus demanded. “He’s happy here, at least, as happy as he can be...I don’t know, it’s difficult to explain. But he has friends *here*.”

Daphne met his eyes with her own hardened gaze. “I am *not* proposing to permanently remove him, Remus,” she said calmly, but with the same hard edge. “I am proposing to educate him privately until Sirius Black is apprehended and/or Kissed. *He* is the immediate danger. I do not blame Albus for the injuries he suffered because of an animal; nor can I reasonably expect Hagrid to have predicted what happened. But I find the fact that Black was able to get Harry alone and far away from help *disturbing*, to say the least.” In reality, everything she had said was true. But there was quite a bit she had *not* said.

Remus studied her, as if trying to find some part of her that he recognized. “You’ve changed, Daphne,” he said quietly.

Snape cut in. “I do not believe that this is the proper time for you two to catch up on old times. Dressler, what are you planning to do?”

“I told you,” she replied with no small amount of irritation in her voice. “I intend to remove Harry from Hogwarts.”

"Daphne," Minerva entreated, "think about this for a moment. If Black is after Harry, how does whether he stays at Hogwarts affect his safety?"

"Because I can't protect him here," Daphne said quietly, her voice sharp enough to cut stone. "I will cut Black to ribbons if he attempts to penetrate the security of Dressler Manor. And the Dementors will catch him eventually, animagus or not."

Minerva frowned. "*Animagus?*"

Dumbledore nodded. "I suppose you didn't hear." He smiled ruefully, something that seemed completely out of place in the grave circumstances. "We had three unregistered animagi running around the grounds about twenty some-odd years ago. Misters Black, Potter, and Pettigrew."

Minerva was taken aback for a moment, but she frowned as concerns about Black's ability to evade capture took precedence over pride in her favorite student, the late James Potter. "Dementors cannot find animagi because their emotions while transformed differ from those of a human, correct?"

"Exactly," Daphne confirmed. She turned to Snape. "Do you know how Black got in the castle?"

Snape shook his head, and then suddenly glared sharply at Lupin. The werewolf sighed. "I think I may know," he said quietly. "If I remember correctly, Sir-*Black* and James mentioned finding a tunnel that led from a cave near the shore of the lake into the lower dungeons. I've never seen it myself."

"Undoubtedly," Snape was heard to mutter. Daphne ignored him.

"Well, than we find the entrance and ward it," she said. She stared at Dumbledore. "There is one way that I'll let him stay," she said. "You will allow me to stay with him in the castle."

"Daphne, you know the rules-

"I've given you two options, no more," Daphne said. "Make your choice. I don't even have to stay in the castle, though I'd prefer to. I'd stay in Hogsmeade, if necessary. But with access to the Floo network in the school, obviously."

"Headmaster," Snape interjected. "I find it highly irregular and unwise to give Potter such preferential treatment. And keep in mind that the boy is in *my* house. I don't want to deal with reports of Dressler threatening anyone that so much as glares at Potter."

"You won't have to," Dumbledore said. "Correct, Daphne?" The weight of his gaze was crushing, but Daphne stayed strong.

"Within reason," she replied. "If a student attacks-"

"Under *no* circumstances," Dumbledore interrupted her. "It is one thing to keep a watchful eye out and to be able to reach him quickly. It is another to be in a position to intimidate students. I encourage my pupils to rely on themselves, not on family name and status." Snape coughed loudly. "...in Slytherin, that does not often work. But the point is still valid. Even if Harry does not intend to bully others, your presence as his constant bodyguard *will* be a problem."

Daphne took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. Dumbledore had a point, no matter how much she hated to admit it. Her name brought with it memories of terror in the minds of *Death Eaters*. For their children? Or just children familiar with her...exploits...?

"I understand your concern, Albus," she said slowly. "But if you're going to convince me to allow him to stay, and I know *he* wants to," she said, glaring pointedly at Remus as she spoke, "then I need to have the ability to be at his side. I also need assurances that he will *never* be alone. His friends will suffice most of the time; they are capable of at *least* getting help. But they *aren't* trained well enough to defeat Black, or even fight him off. I need assurances that someone who *can* will be there in time."

"Is that *all* you ask? Why not ask Albus to chop down a tree with a *herring*?" Snape muttered darkly. Dumbledore gave him a reproving glance.

"I will do all in my power to insure that that happens, Daphne," he said firmly. "I will allow you to stay in Hogsmeade if it will help your sense of mind."

"What I want is for Harry to wear that ring," Daphne said softly. "But he's sick of relying on me...at least that's what he said."

"Perhaps I could talk to him?" Remus asked. "I assume you are referring to a ring that burns when the wearer of the counterpart is in danger."

"I am," Daphne confirmed. "Harry won't listen. He's sick of me breathing down his neck," she said in a downcast voice.

"And what, *exactly*, do you call bursting into a private meeting and demanding to be allowed to withdraw him from the school?" Snape asked, this time in an audible voice.

Daphne didn't really have an answer for that. "I'd still like to stay in the castle."

"I'm sure you would, Daphne, but I cannot allow that. If Harry wears the ring, you can be here as fast as if you lived in Hogsmeade. I will give you free access to my fireplace, if that is what you want," Dumbledore offered.

Daphne knew that was the best she'd get. She wouldn't be able to continue her work and training in Hogsmeade anyway. And *if* Scrimgeour ever got back to her on her job request, it might be more difficult to travel back and forth. "Fine. I give up," she said, defeated. Her eyes came back to life. "But I *will* withdraw Harry, protection or not, if he is attacked again. I'm doing this as a favor to both him and you. If I had my way, I'd be his private tutor behind the walls of Dressler Manor."

There was silence for a long moment. Snape snorted derisively and turned towards the wall in disgust. Minerva cleared her throat. "It appears we are done, then."

"Not quite," Remus spoke up. "Daphne, I want to speak to you. *Alone*," he said, placing special emphasis on the word. Daphne nodded curtly in reply.

"Very well," Albus said. "Return to your students, and keep me informed. Remus, tomorrow we must search for this passage and seal it."

"It might be easier if we still had the Marauder's Map," Remus admitted. "Though I don't remember ever seeing that tunnel there before."

"The Marauder's...?"

"I will explain later, Minerva," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling. "I'm afraid I don't know what became of that fine object. A pity; it was quite a feat of charmwork." Daphne had to agree with that assessment. The final feature, the ability to track every person in the castle, hadn't been created until their Seventh Year, when Lily, already going out with James, had given in to his insistent requests that she use her talent with Charms to help them. She had, despite Daphne's loud objections.

Snape looked murderous, but did not say a word before spinning on his heel and marching out of the office, headed for the dungeons. Daphne beckoned Remus out of the office, and her old friend followed, looking weary and tired. "Let's speak in my office," he suggested, walking down the hallway to it and unlocking the door. "Pardon the mess," he added ruefully.

Daphne merely nodded in reply. Remus offered her a seat, but she didn't take it. Remus remained standing as well. "Well, I suppose we needed to have this conversation sooner or later," Remus admitted, shrugging his shoulders. "This seems as good a time as any. It's been a *long* time."

"Twelve years," Daphne replied. "Well...almost."

Remus sighed. "Would you please be seated?" he asked. Daphne gave in and Summoned a chair so that it was in front of his desk. She took a seat slowly, and Remus did the same. They stared at each

other for several seconds, neither one daring to speak. They both had things they'd rather leave unsaid, but knew that was impossible.

Remus cracked first. "I suppose I should begin. At least you were there for him."

Daphne nodded. She might have told him that it was all right, but that would be a lie. If she hadn't been there, she could have lived with Remus raising Harry. But the man had fled months before. "Why?" she asked. "Why did you leave?"

Remus sighed, and his eyes were full of old pain. "I had an argument with James," he said, his voice dead and heavy. "He accused me of being the spy that had betrayed the Order, and was leaking secrets."

"It was because you were a werewolf," Daphne said. It was not a question.

Remus nodded. "Yes, it was, as much as he didn't want to admit it." He sighed, sounding ashamed. "I lost my temper, yelled at him, and then made the mistake of thinking about hurting his family in revenge...it was just a glance up the stairs, but I knew what it meant as well as he did."

Daphne didn't flinch. She'd expected far worse. "Go on."

Remus sighed again. "And...that was it. I left that night, spent some time in France, found out what happened to Lily and James and...Peter," he said, though it was clear he'd meant to say something else. Even now, Peter was just the unimportant tag-along. Daphne had always felt slightly sympathetic, but she couldn't feel sorry for him when he chose to feed James's ego. There were others that could have accepted him, but he chose those with the most power and influence. "I mourned a bit," he continued, "then ended up in Cairo. I spent twelve years there, trying to find steady work. It wasn't easy."

Daphne nodded. Even though the Anti-Werewolf laws had been softened so that werewolves could own homes, businesses, and work for pay, they still were distrusted and feared by many. Werewolves were also not allowed to have children without a brutally impersonal

procedure where the pregnant wife would be examined to see if the baby she carried had Lycanthropy. The disease was rarely inherited, but if it were, the babies would be taken from the parents and raised in a Ministry institution. There, it was said, they were abused, belittled, and mistreated for something they couldn't control. Eventually, they *might* be returned to their parents, but ironically, most of them went feral and ended up being executed for biting others. The practice was, in Daphne's mind, both barbaric and idiotic at the same time. It was rarely implemented, but the fear alone kept many werewolves from marrying or having children.

"Anyway," he continued, "I just...let it all go...I forgot about everything I'd left behind, I mean...I still remembered everything, but I just tried to keep it out of my mind...do you understand?"

Daphne nodded. She'd tried...and failed to do the same.

Remus glared at her. "I shouldn't be doing *all* of the talking, Daphne," he said firmly. "You have as much to answer for as I do, perhaps more."

Daphne met his eyes. "I regret a great many things, Remus," she said softly. "But I can't dwell upon my past. I don't regret what I have become, only the way that I was *forged*."

Remus threw his hands up. "I've been here for barely two months, Daphne, and I've already found out that no matter how much you don't want to dwell on your past, you don't have a *choice*. It follows you, Daphne. You have blood on your hands, and you can't just-

"*You dare to judge me?*" Daphne demanded. "Do you think I don't remember the face of every man or woman I've ever cut down, every Death Eater that I tortured, every single victim of the war that I saw as they suffered? Do you believe I could just *forget* that?"

"Of course not!" Remus yelled, his eyes flashing amber once more. "Have I accused you of being *heartless!* NO! I've accused you of being too content and confident that you've left it all behind you! No wonder Harry is the way he is!"

Daphne stopped, her eyes narrowing to razor-thin slits. "And what, my dear friend Remus, was *that* supposed to mean?"

Remus lost his temper again, violently clearing his desk with the sweep of his hand. Neither one of them paid the slightest attention to the sounds of shattering glass and ceramic. Their eyes bored into one another's, fighting for dominance. Daphne struggled to keep her magic under control. She was *furious* with the werewolf at the moment, but that didn't mean she wanted him dead. But he *was* testing her patience with every insinuation that she had failed Harry as a mother. *What right does he, a pathetic coward, have to question how I raised him? He knows nothing!*

"You know *exactly* what I'm talking about!" Remus cried, pointing an accusing finger at her as one would a wand. "I can't see a bloody *hint* of James or Lily in him! He's manipulative, underhanded, and *far* too mature for his age! He acts like a soldier half of the time! He's not supposed to shake off these threats to his life as if...as if they are some bloody *detention*, or something like that! He's supposed to be fearful! He's supposed to seek out his elders, not mock them! For Merlin's sake, Daphne, he *knew* what I was! And he still pushed me to tell him personally, as if taking some perverted *pleasure* from forcing my deepest secret from me! I see hope in him yet, but even after I offered to spend time with him, he has ignored me, treated me like McGonagall or someone like that!" He panted, exhausted from his rant. Daphne didn't flinch.

"He is who he is, Remus," she hissed. "I admit that I have made several horrible errors in the past year. I failed to protect him from Riddle. I completely lost it in the Chamber, forgetting where I was and what I was doing, so focused I was on vengeance. But I raised him right, Remus. I have prepared him, and he has accepted what lies before him."

"Prepared him for *what?*" Remus demanded. "For battle? He's *thirteen bloody years old!* He's not *supposed* to be thinking about these things! He's supposed to be thinking about brooms and Quidditch and girls, not Dark Magic!"

Daphne winced, ever so slightly; but her eyes hardened. "Yes, he should," she agreed. "But unfortunately, Harry is not like most teenage wizards. He has responsibilities, Remus, responsibilities that you can't even imagine."

Remus scoffed. "Try me?"

Daphne shook her head. "I cannot," she explained.

Remus growled at her. "Then how do I know that you are even telling the truth?" he demanded. "How do I know you aren't just making something up to make yourself feel better? What could Harry possibly be expected to do at his age? Tell me, Daphne. What is he supposed to be able to do?"

Daphne closed her eyes. She knew that if Remus pushed her much farther, she'd probably scream the contents of the Prophecy. Remus's Lycanthropy made it difficult to impossible to penetrate his mind, but she didn't trust him. "Leave it, Remus. He is who he is. He is *Slytherin*, and he is a credit to that House. He is intelligent, motivated, and quick thinking. He isn't cruel or crude, though he sometimes makes misjudgments. I highly doubt that he cares that you are a werewolf."

Remus stared at her for a long moment, and Daphne could almost feel the shame that overtook him. "You're right," he said finally. "I'm still just...shocked. I didn't expect him to be like this. He reminds me all too much of Snape at times."

Daphne's eyes flared, and she could tell that Remus knew he'd gone too far. "He is *nothing* like that Death Eater," she bit out. "Just because you, James, Black, and Pettigrew liked to associate Snape with every Slytherin you ever met, with the possible exception of my...husband, that doesn't mean your immature judgments were in any way *accurate*."

"I know that, Daphne," Remus said quietly. "I have a lot to be ashamed of, for the way we behaved. It was one thing to be practical jokers, but what we did to Snape and other hapless students was far beyond the level of acceptable behavior. And while I rarely participated in it, I did nothing to stop it."

"At least you can admit that," Daphne said, running a hand through her hair tiredly. She stood up. "We've spoken enough," she said firmly. "If you still have problems, speak with me personally...but not tonight."

"Fine," Remus said stiffly. His expression softened. "I'm sorry for how much of an arse I've been. I'm just worried about him...and you."

Daphne stared at her friend in disbelief. "Me?" she asked incredulously. "You're worried about *me*?"

"You've changed so much, Daphne," he said quietly. "Perhaps you've been like this the entire time, and I've just failed to notice. But you've lost something along the way. You aren't the curious, intelligent, hard-working, and easily-amused girl you once were."

Daphne stared at him in disbelief. "*That*," she said, "is obvious. I don't know if I was ever as you described, but I know that whatever part of me that was *died* a long time ago. My love of life, you'd probably describe it as? My desire to live a long and content existence?" She took in a deep breath, fighting back the horrors of her past, which by their very presence threatened to overwhelm her. "Gone," she said.

Remus frowned, looking at her as if he thought she was *joking*. "But Daphne, surely you must—"

"I died a *long time ago*, Remus," she said softly. "Daphne O'Connor *died* when her heart was *ripped out*, her friends and family *murdered* and her mind *shattered* by grief and rage. The girl is nothing more than an old dream, a fading memory. What *is* left is two women: the Grey Maiden, Dark Auror, and the loving, fanatically protective surrogate mother of the Boy-Who-Lived. That is who *I* am, Remus. I live for vengeance and out of love for Harry. If he were to die...I *couldn't* go on. I'd simply drop dead, my body *finally* catching up to my blackened and twisted soul. It is over for me, Remus. It is only a matter of *time*."

Remus stared at her in total disbelief. It felt strange to speak of herself in the third person, but she also knew that everything she said was the absolute truth. It had taken months of soul-searching, years of atonement, before she had come to the awful conclusion that she

was already dead. All that was left was a shadow, a haunted apparition driven by two opposing desires. She had never told this to Harry, of course. But Remus needed to hear it. She had a feeling Dumbledore already knew she felt this way, and she was certain that Andromeda did as well. *Andy has always read me better than anyone. Even Lily couldn't see into the depths of my soul, as she seemed capable of doing.*

"I don't know what to say," Remus said lamely. "I never pegged you as one to give up..."

Daphne refused to be baited. "Save the challenges for someone who will listen, Remus. I made peace with this *long* ago. It is time for you to accept it."

"I cannot," Remus protested. "I won't let you think like that. For Harry's sake, if for nothing else."

Daphne laughed lightly. "If you tell him what I just told you, I *will* kill you. I will *not* allow you to jeopardize *his* happiness to settle *your* own feelings of inadequacy."

With that, she got up, spun around, and strode out of the room.

Remus remained there for several minutes, trying to comprehend what she had told him. It seemed like a massive contradiction; a last gasp attempt to explain something that could not be explained. But the conviction with which she said it left no doubt that she believed every word.

Remus didn't know what to do. He wanted to scream and cry at the same time. To weep for his friend and to curse her for doing this to all three of them.

But he could not.

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As his near-death experiences had gone, Harry's latest misadventure had been rather tame. The worst injury he had suffered had been a concussion; though Madam Pomfrey had also said she needed to re-heal a badly repaired broken nose. Harry figured that Black had done

it to prevent Harry from dripping blood all the way to his hideout. The fact that he hadn't killed Harry probably wasn't a good thing: there were a number of Ancient Dark Rituals that could supposedly use the enemies of a fallen Dark Wizard to resurrect or return that wizard to full power. The details were sketchy, as were the reports of success. Still, if Black were deranged enough, *that* would hardly stop him.

While only a small number of Slytherins had seen him as he was led out of the dungeons, the news that Harry had been attacked spread remarkably quickly. Snape had also seen fit to announce that it had been Black that had penetrated the defenses of the castle. Now, the students were both frightened and madly curious. No matter how many times Harry either refused to speak with them, ignored them, or told them in excruciating detail exactly how *little* he'd actually seen, pests like Colin Creevy were the bane of his existence.

Still, they had moved on, as Harry had been forced to do all too often in the last three years. He was still alive, he was perfectly healthy, and that was all he needed. Still, he was relieved when the long awaited owl from Dumbledore finally arrived during breakfast.

Currently, Harry sat on a chair facing the venerable Headmaster. The situation this time was quite different than their last meeting. Not only had Harry been under the influence of Dumbledore's former pupil, Tom Riddle, but the meeting had been initiated by Dumbledore as a way of finding out more about the Boy-Who-Lived. This time, it was Harry who was looking for the answers. Hermione's frantic worries about what Dumbledore might say were still ringing in his ears. She was terrified by her new found ability, which seemed to manifest itself only when she used fire-related spells. Her normally harmless Ignition Spell now created something resembling a Muggle blowtorch. They hadn't even tried her Burning Hex since she'd nearly killed Harry twice.

Dumbledore stared over at him, towering over him even while seated. His blue eyes twinkled with curiosity between his half-moon glasses. Harry still couldn't decide if the strange twinkle was something created by magic or a physical ability. He'd never seen a Demiguise; they were extraordinarily rare, hunted because their priceless coats were weaved into the same kind of Invisibility Cloak that James

Potter had inherited from his father, and that Harry now had tucked neatly into the pocket of his robes. "You wanted to see me, Harry?" he asked, betraying nothing of the fact that he'd probably been expecting this meeting, given everything that had happened. He had no doubt that Dumbledore had detected Hermione's flares of wild magic, and he probably already knew the reason that the Hippogriff had attacked him.

"I did, sir," Harry replied politely. "I have a number of questions I'd like to see answered. I believe that you are the one most likely to know the answers."

"I will do what I can," the Headmaster replied. "What is it that you wish to ask?"

Harry met his gaze. "You know what I want to ask," he said. It was not a question, but a statement that he had no desire to play the man's games. One of Dumbledore's greatest assets was his ability to act as if he knew far less than he did. Harry was wise enough to not be fooled.

Dumbledore shrugged. "Perhaps. I believe you wish to discuss Miss Granger's unexpected abilities. And your own, for that matter."

Harry nodded. "Have you ever seen anything like it before? She's always been a bit powerful and skilled for her age, but I've never seen anything like this."

Dumbledore nodded. "It is rare, but not unheard of, for witches and wizards to specialize in certain areas. There are, of course, different levels of specialization. Some have slightly more power; others can cast certain types of spells with greater speed or ease. There are some, a few per generation, who demonstrate a facility with certain types of spells that vastly exceeds the normal adult witch or wizard. I know of only two cases. One, of course, is Lord Voldemort. Never before has a wizard so easily wielded the Unforgivables, all three of them. His proclivity is for Dark Magic in general, and an *Avada Kedavra* is an *Avada Kedavra*, regardless of the wizard, but his *Cruciatus* is the most vicious I have ever seen...well, that *is* a matter of debate..."

Harry knew exactly what Dumbledore was referring to. While it wasn't exactly something that one could interview a Death Eater and determine, many Death Eaters claimed that the only thing worse than being placed under the Cruciatus by Lord Voldemort was being tortured by the Grey Maiden. The difference being, of course, that Voldemort needed his servants sane. Daphne had no such inhibitions. It was frightening, in a way, to understand that the woman who had been so good to him, raising him with all the care and love that a boy could ever want, treating him as she would her own son, could be compared in that way to the fallen Dark Lord. But then again, he knew the agony that she could inflict. Her awesome power had been turned against him in the worst of ways. *Perhaps it is a question of the power of the memories that Daphne can draw...but the Cruciatus cannot be used with righteous anger; only a deep desire to cause pain can allow its use...but does what happened to Daphne somehow excuse her for what she did to other human beings, as horrible as they may have been..?*

He didn't know the answer. He suspected that he never would.

"Perhaps I was tactless," Dumbledore admitted. "I had not meant to remind you of such painful memories. I merely wished to illustrate a point. There is another example of specialized wizards and witches. Your very own Transfiguration teacher, Professor McGonagall, is the most skilled Transfiguration Mistresses in almost one hundred years. While her power had ebbed with age, her abilities remain fearsome."

"So," Harry concluded, frowning, "you are saying that Hermione could eventually develop a level of mastery of fire-related spell, which, mind you, include some of the foulest Dark Magic, such as the Incineration Curse, that could rival Voldemort's control of the Unforgivables and Professor McGonagall's Transfiguration skill?"

"Potentially, yes," Dumbledore says. "I have heard of cases where such a thing has happened to Muggleborn witches, but this type is almost unheard of, if my readings of her power were accurate. I'm sure you know, but due to the late start they have in their magical education, few Muggleborns advance to a level of magical skill equal to the average pureblood?"

Harry nodded. Hermione had viciously attacked that statistic when he'd found it in his reading. She'd been outraged that such a conclusion was drawn without taking into account the shock of a Muggleborn child entering a strange and unfamiliar world. "So what does this mean for her?"

Dumbledore paused, deep in thought. "She, of course, must learn to control her power just as you must. Unfortunately, she cannot have her gifts sealed away until it is safe because they aren't purely power that can be separated from rest. They are a proclivity."

Harry nodded. "So she should begin training with you as soon as she can?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, she should begin training with *Minerva* as soon as she can. As I recall, Professor McGonagall had quite a time when she began spontaneously Transfiguring objects, living and inanimate. By a mere thought, she could perform immensely complex magic. She will be able to help Miss Granger cope with her abilities."

Harry nodded. The idea made sense, given what he'd discovered, and while he and McGonagall still didn't get along that well, a relic of his first year, Hermione was probably the Transfiguration Professor's favorite student since his father. And he knew that Hermione loved the woman's classes for their detail and clarity. But, of course, Hermione was only half of the reason he'd come. "And what about me? That Hippogriff didn't maul me because I didn't smell good."

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I suspected as much," he said with a smile. "I must admit, I've never seen such a strong reaction, though I frightened my fair share of magical creatures in my youth. Like you, I was the most powerful wizard of my generation, albeit for different reasons."

Harry nodded, though inside, his heart was pounding. History revealed few who were, in their primes, a match for the power, intelligence, and capabilities of Albus Dumbledore. The man was a living legend, his name and his exploits known all over the Wizarding world, far beyond the borders of the insular British Magical Community. He'd been compared to Merlin on more than one

occasion, and had often convinced skeptics that those judgments might not have been exaggerations. The very thought that he might be in that class stunned him, something that some might find inexplicable when one considered what he'd already done. But he knew better than that. *I came here with conservative goals, he thought, I wanted to achieve what others could achieve on my own merits, yet the Sorting Hat saw through those childish wishes. It saw the ambition, the drive to be the very best I can be, to achieve as much power and influence as I can, to restore the Potter name to the ranks of great wizarding families...the thought that I might actually be able to achieve all of that is just...*

He couldn't think of a word. With his power sealed away, and Daphne's instructions to hide it as best he could, he rarely pondered what it meant. He knew he was powerful, possessing magical abilities far beyond many of the greatest adult wizards...*more powerful than Daphne*, he thought. Somehow, that reality was even more awe-inspiring. *She did much for me, and I spent my entire childhood worshiping her, learning from her. I have benefited, just as I have suffered for seeking to emulate her behavior. But all of that aside, it seems to defy belief that I might some day eclipse the Grey Maiden...on my own...*

He glanced up, and suddenly felt his face warm. Dumbledore was staring at him, a bemused smile on his face. "Ah, Delusions of Grandeur," he said, speaking the words as if they were a title for the most wonderful thing on Earth. "I know what you are thinking, Harry, for once, long ago, the same thoughts ran through my head. I saw myself doing things that no one thought possible...sadly, many of them turned out to be correct. You possess power, Harry, but I caution you, not against the urge to exercise that power, but to embrace the arrogant belief that you are indestructible." He smiled, and this time, it was genuine happiness. "Fortunately, by the very fact that you were embarrassed by your thoughts, I conclude that you have the perspective and rationality needed to avoid such thoughts."

He paused, his tone turning from hopeful to regretful. "I daresay, at the risk of bringing your guardian's vengeance down upon me, that you near-death experiences have taught you a valuable lesson. Not that I would ask anyone else to live them; they are also quite

damaging in their own right, and no child such as yourself should be forced to undergo such ordeals, but they have taught you something, I believe."

"I have been humbled," Harry said, the words sounding strange on his tongue. "I have been inches from death, yet I do not believe that I survived because of skill or power. I lived by sheer good fortune."

Dumbledore gazed at him, his expression serious. "Forgive me for my concern, but I must impress upon you something extraordinarily important. And keep in mind that I care for you just as I cared for your parents; you are far more to me than a weapon or a tool with which to reach my goals. Indeed, the odds are that if you survive, it will be your face that appears on the Chocolate Frog Cards...I must make a request, however, that even following my passing, they continued to make them. They have ceased in the past to commemorate the deaths of great wizards. I cannot have them do the same for me. It is sad, Harry, that we so often allow political correctness to get in the way of logic."

Despite himself, Harry laughed. Dumbledore smiled at him. "Another tip: Never forget that you are a human, and that you have needs. Always remember: A laugh can be as powerful as the most vicious of spells."

Harry nodded. "I'll do well to remember that," he said softly. He wasn't sure he understood it at the moment, but something told him that, eventually, he'd believe it was the most precious advice anyone had ever given to him.

Dumbledore frowned slightly at him. "Harry, I would *appreciate* if you didn't look at me as if I have *all* the answers. I assure you that I do not. I make errors of judgment often, but one of the luxuries of long-past fame is that the small ones tend to be ignored...of course, one of the curses of fame is that the larger ones tend to be front-page news."

Harry smiled slightly. He was well aware of *that*.

"While it may be true that I am one of the few that can understand you in this sense, do not make the mistake of placing me up on a pedestal," Dumbledore continued.

"I understand, sir," Harry said. "But I did have other things I wished to speak about..."

Dumbledore shook his head as if to clear it. "Forgive me, I was rambling. An unfortunate effect of my advanced years...you wish to discuss the possible ramifications of your power, and how to avoid having it exposed."

"And how to avoid further injury to myself," Harry admitted. "I've seen too much of the Hospital Wing this year."

"Indeed, I believe Poppy is considering reserving a bed for you," Dumbledore remarked. "As for your question, I agree with your belief that the Hippogriff attacked you because it was alarmed by the power it saw."

"It's not just that," Harry admitted. He met Dumbledore's eyes. "I think that it was frightened not just by my power, but that so much of my magic is laced with the essence of Tom Riddle."

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully for a moment. "An excellent theory, and one that I had not yet considered. And one that, based upon my knowledge, is very likely true...would you mind if I examined your magical core? I might find some answers to some troubling questions."

Harry shrugged. Truth be told, he still didn't like the idea of someone entering his mind. But he saw little harm in it, and he wanted those answers as well. "I don't have a problem with it," he said.

Dumbledore nodded. "Good. Please relax your defenses, Harry, to make this as quick and painless as possible."

Harry did, consciously pulling down the still-porous defenses that he had been constructed in his sessions with Snape. The man never complemented him openly, but still seemed pleased by the progress that he had made. Harry was also getting better at stomaching the

memories that Snape often went for, his most damaging, frightening and painful. But Harry had determined that, despite all appearances and conventional wisdom of what Snape thought of Potters, the man took no pleasure in watching Daphne torture him. He did it because he *had* to, and Harry could live with that.

Daphne had asked him about it constantly, searching for any claim she could make that Snape was mentally abusing her ward, but Harry gave her nothing. There was nothing to give. It didn't mean that he *liked* Snape, far from it. The man still struck him as cold, ruthless, manipulative, and *Dark*. But unlike his father and guardian, he had found a kind of grudging respect for his abilities and intelligence. Snape expected no more, and probably *desired* nothing more.

He felt Dumbledore's presence enter his mind, but instead of going for the nexus of memories that Snape often sifted through, he dove deeper, racing for the center of Harry magic. He found it, and Harry inhaled sharply. It was like being prodded with a finger located deep inside his gut, somewhere where there shouldn't technically be any room for an extra organ or structure. It made sense that the Magical Core should be located in the center of his body, but it was a *very* uncomfortable feeling.

Dumbledore blinked, and the connection was broken. His face was a mask of disgust, something he hid in less than a second. Nonetheless, Harry felt himself blush in embarrassment and shame. He blinked, trying to shake off the almost *childish* insecurities and emotions. "It is not your fault, Harry," Dumbledore said with strong conviction. "But as we feared, you were correct. Your magic is stained with his Darkness. It is hardly irreversible; I know a number of ways to remove the taint; but it will make taming it all the more difficult."

Harry nodded, trying to fight back the bile that threatened to rise in his throat.

"I shall need to think on this," the Headmaster said, "to consult my vast stores of knowledge, and perhaps to consult a few friends...without naming you, of course. For know, keep control of your emotions. Fight back the urge to stretch out, to do what should

be beyond you. It may be that I will need to train you personally, but we will determine that if and when the time comes. For now, enjoy your youth, Harry. Do not allow this to weigh upon your mind." He smiled, almost sadly. "You have wonderful and loyal friends, Harry, and the seeds of friendship with many others. Do not allow them to go to waste."

Harry thought of Ginny and Hermione, and how both of them were uncomfortable with his mature thoughts at times. "I will, sir."

Dumbledore nodded, and Harry rose. "Thank you," Harry said honestly. Far from being consumed by his new knowledge or fearful of Riddle's taint, he was glad to be rid of a great deal of the uncertainty that had been weighing upon him.

"I will always be here for you, Harry," Dumbledore said, the twinkle in the man's blue eyes returning with full intensity.

With a small nod, Harry turned and left.

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A/N: Unfortunately, as much as I'm dying to write the absolutely insane climax I have planned for this thing, I can't do it yet. I hope that having Snape ambush and stop Sirius doesn't bring the Snape-haters crashing down on me. He's a bastard, plain and simple, and I don't like him. Harry respects him because he understands how valuable he can be, and has a perverted, screwed-up sympathy for him because they both endured harassment at the hands of their classmates. That's the biggest reason that Harry is so uncertain about his father: he can so easily place himself in Snape's shoes. Sirius isn't stupid, though he isn't brilliant either. He's been mostly unlucky thus far, and his mind is still a bit...off, and will remain so for the near future.

The confrontation between Daphne and Remus was a wake-up call...for both of them. Daphne is finally having to accept that she can't always be there to protect Harry, no matter how much she wants to be. I haven't mentioned the ring before now because I was saving it for this moment. Harry's refusal to wear it is symbolic in more ways than one. He is still unsure about his guardian, unable to shake off the memories of what she did to him in the Chamber. He's

also determined to stop using her as a crutch and to fight his own battles. Unfortunately, things aren't going well in that regard. All of this bloodshed and torment I'm putting Harry through is slowly beginning to change him, and on the final battlefield, his thoughts and emotions are going to seem downright alien compared to the Harry we saw in HBP. As for Remus, Daphne shared something with him that she hadn't told anyone, despite the fact that she is (rightly) suspicious of his behavior toward Harry. Remus is not looking to steal Harry from her, but he is not pleased by what she's made of him, and fears for his future as Daphne's life continues to come crashing down around her.

Ah, Hermione. This is something I indirectly borrowed from LotW (at least, the proclivity of Light wizards towards fire spells). Obviously, it will have tremendous ramifications once she's trained up. As for those who are bombarding me with concern that I'm making her a Mary Sue, I'm about to loose it. I'm not exactly sure how you've missed it, but Hermione has a number of issues, some important now, others important later. Her anxiety and concern for Harry is grinding against him, and he's getting irritated with her, because he's starting to understand that he doesn't have the option of being scared. At this point, also, Hermione would make a downright shitty battle commander. She's too compassionate, too unable to see the world in a wider perspective. She's still very naive, as is Ginny. Just because Hermione is intelligent and powerful doesn't make her a bloody Mary Sue. She's not that attractive, and I see no reason to change that, as it's part of who she is. She's a better flyer than in canon, but only just. And right now, she's frightened of her newfound abilities. Trust me, she is not perfect, and war tends to display one's weaknesses and strengths for all to see.

Even more aggravating is that I'm getting people concerned that I've put Ginny down too hard, and made her less powerful than she should be. Let me repeat something: she's twelve years old. She is not yet a teenager. Please, do not make assumptions about the future of any characters, because I'm not following any plot I've seen before. By Dawn of Light, JKR's canon world will be in shambles. No person or place is safe. People die in war, and not just the irrelevant characters. The survivors will emerge changed forever, and haunted by their memories of those loved and lost, as well as their own deeds. The angst machine is just getting started.

Okay, I should add that I'm not angry at anyone in particular, because I don't expect you to read my mind. I'm just frustrated, and needed to get some things out. Keep in mind that even the reviews I'm referring to gave me the knowledge that I needed to further explain some things. I wouldn't have known that if you didn't tell me. And don't ask about romance, it's so far off it's not even funny. There will be hints here and there, because I'm not about to repeat JKR's mistake and make feelings come from nowhere.

I don't mean to be a jerk, really, I don't. Just keep in mind what I've said. The next chapter is already in the works.

## Chapter 13: Confusing Signals

Her red hair a blur in the rushing wind, Ginny Weasley raced towards the three hoops, brown eyes narrowed and her face set with determination. She hurled the not-quite-spherical crimson ball towards the center one, grunting with the effort.

Even from his vantage point of the sidelines, Harry could see that his friend's shot wasn't a good one. Her mechanics were off, and she expended maximum effort with minimum efficiency, while also releasing the ball too late. As he followed the trajectory, he grimaced as the wooden Quaffle clanged off the side of the center hoop, falling like a rock and burrowing into the sand below. He heard Ginny's scream of frustration. She banked hard and headed back down to retrieve the Quaffle, her face red from a combination of the biting cold, her anger and not just a touch of embarrassment for 'clanging' the Quaffle at point-blank range. *She's really got her mind in a twist*, he thought.

"Sodding Quaffle! Sodding bloody Quidditch!" she grumbled under her breath. Harry was standing downwind however, and heard it. He smiled in amusement. She noticed his smile and glared at him.

"Mind letting me rant in peace?" she snapped, yanking the tie roughly out of her hair and letting it fall down over her shoulders, shaking her head violently. Her small hands were curled into fists and shaking with frustration. Harry's smile widened as he watched her vent. She was cute when she got so worked up...He banished the thought and looked away as quickly as he could. The situation was bad enough without him staring at her.

"You kiss your mother with that mouth?" Harry asked dryly, though he regretted it as the Quaffle came sailing towards his head. He threw up his hands instantly and caught it. Ginny looked absolutely furious, not so much at the way he was handling the situation, but that he had done something she'd apparently been unable to do on a consistent basis during her first game: Catch the Quaffle.

"Yes, I do," she snapped back. Whether it was the cold, or the realization that what she was doing wasn't helping, she seemed to

wilt before his eyes, her body relaxing and slumping forward in miserable exhaustion. "I'm never going to get this," she said bitterly.

Harry walked over to her and put a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him, more than a little irritated. Ginny was a girl who preferred to be allowed to yell, cry or mope in peace. Harry, on the other hand, wasn't going to let her get away with keeping him out in the howling November wind and still making no progress. "You know, the key to playing at your best is to be *relaxed*," he told her. With just a moment of hesitation, he probed her upper back and shoulders with his fingers, and found the muscles rock-hard. "You are *really* tense."

"I know that!" Ginny snapped, pulling away from him and heading back to his Nimbus 2000, the broom hovering two feet above the ground. She yelled something back to him that was lost in the wind.

"What was that?" Harry yelled back.

Ginny turned around. "I said that *relaxing* is the last thing I feel like doing!" she yelled over at him. She bent to pick up the broom and opened her mouth to say something, then gave up and walked back over to him. "I just don't understand," she said, sounding miserable. "I was always such a good flier; Charlie was always proud of how good I was. And when I've flown with you I've always been pretty good. But now that I try to play competitively, I *stink*."

Harry sighed, searching for comforting words. "You fly better than Hermione," he said, wincing as he realized how poorly-timed that statement was. Ginny was glaring at him now, and he realized he'd managed to insult two of his best friends at the same time. "That didn't come out right."

"You aren't helping," Ginny groaned. She quickly tied her hair back into a ponytail, yelping as her fingers stuck in a knot. The situation was rapidly escalating in the wrong direction. "Dammit!"

"Calm down," he ordered her, approaching her again. "You're just getting worked up and hurting yourself. Here," he said, trying to disentangle Ginny's fingers from her hair. She gave him a grateful look as he let go.

"Thanks," she said, her voice softening for a moment. Then her eyes hardened. "I'm not giving up, though," she vowed, mounting the broom. "I don't care *how* cold it is, I'm going to keep at this until I've got myself straightened out."

"You know, your mother won't be pleased if you end up with hypothermia," he said dryly, indicating the threatening clouds. "And *I am* freezing out here," he pointed out.

She glared at him again. "Who says you need to stay out here?" she asked sharply.

Harry gave her a meaningful look. "And leave you to your own devices?" he asked questioningly. "I know you, Ginny. I know that your desire to succeed is only surpassed by your stubbornness. You'll either hurt yourself or freeze to death out here."

Ginny scowled at him. "It's not *that* cold," she protested. "It isn't snowing."

Harry pulled his robes, under which he was already wearing his Weasley sweater from the previous year, closer to his body, shivering slightly, his teeth rattling together as if to emphasize a point. He met her gaze, and she looked down after a moment. "One more shot?" she asked, almost begging. Harry paused, and then reluctantly nodded. She smiled and took to the air.

Harry held up a hand. "Wait," he commanded. He drew his wand with a flick of his wrist, and raised it towards the castle. "Accio Shooting Star."

There was a long moment of silence, and then he spotted a lone broom moving over the grounds towards the pitch. He grinned widely. He'd been practicing the Summoning Charm for several days, and had mastered it the previous evening. It was well above his year, but not a particularly difficult spell to master if one had sufficient focus. Ginny was already in the air, calming herself before she took a last run at the hoop. Harry mounted his Summoned broom, flying up to hover in front of the goals. He'd never played Keeper before, but he figured this might actually work.

Ginny charged toward him, and Harry saw the widening of her brown eyes as she traced his upward trajectory and the hardening of her resolve as she saw him stop directly in her path. She dove immediately, racing downward, her ponytail flying out from behind her. Harry didn't take the bait, turning in a tight circle in front of the hoops. Then she peeled to the right, and this time, Harry sensed her intent and moved to follow...until she flew up and to the left, hurling the ball past his outstretched arm and into the left hoop. She whooped with glee, smirking victoriously at him. Harry landed nearby, smiling. "I got it!" she cried, apparently uncaring at how minor an accomplishment it was. Harry had the feeling it was only a lack of confidence holding her back.

Then, abruptly, Ginny raced up to him and threw her arms around him, squeezing tightly and whispering something that sounded both grateful and angry at the same time. And in that brief second, with his best friend wrapped in his arms, Harry was abruptly gripped by the strong, almost *irresistible* impulse to kiss her. He began to bend his head...

*What?*

He stopped the movement, consciously forcing the thoughts out of his mind, shivering abruptly at the almost *frightening* idea. He couldn't think straight, so complete was his confusion. Ginny let go of him, looking at him strangely. "Are you alright?" she asked, frowning.

"Fine," Harry replied quickly. A little *too* quickly.

Ginny didn't look satisfied with his answer, and Harry felt a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. *What is wrong with me? First I want to kiss my twelve-year old best friend, then I'm frightened by both that possibility and the possibility that she might find out.*

"Let's get inside," she said, retrieving his broom. Harry grabbed the school broom, slinging it over his shoulder. He felt extremely uncomfortable, and had to first the urge to run away from the apparently harmless redhead. Ginny's eyes continued to probe him, trying to figure out what was causing him to act so strangely. The urge to flee intensified, but he knew that it would only make it worse if

he had to explain *that* to Ginny Weasley. He simply nodded, trying to pass off the pink on his cheeks as a product of the cold.

He needed time to think about this.

He didn't say anything during the long walk back to the castle, and Ginny gave him more than one questioning look. They were distracted however, by a rather loud row going on in the middle of the Entrance Hall. On one side was Ron Weasley, red-faced and furious. On the other side, her hands on her hips defiantly, was Hermione. The Twins stood off to the side with their friend, Lee Jordan, and it looked like they were making bets as to who would win the fight, if the flash of metal he saw was money changing hands. Harry rolled his eyes.

He listened to what was being said. "Crookshanks is a cat! What do you expect him to do?" she demanded angrily. "It's his nature to chase rats, and I'd hope you might bring this up in a private conversation instead of causing this scene in the middle of the Entrance Hall!"

"Do you think I care?" Ron yelled back at her. "I want you to promise to keep that *monster* away from Scabbers!"

Harry turned to Ginny, confused. "Scabbers?" he questioned.

"Ron's rat," she explained. "He used to belong to Percy, before he got Hermes. He's a useless old thing, but Ron's rather attached to him."

"Apparently," Harry said dryly. Anger rose in him. He had always been defensive of Hermione, all the way back to before they were friends. The fact that it was Ron Weasley he'd typically been defending her from only made it worse. He stepped forward, taking in his surroundings out of habit. He didn't expect this to end in a duel, a duel he'd almost certainly win, but it was good to be prepared. "What's going on here?" he asked in as commanding a voice as he could muster. It wasn't full of emotion, but steady and level, the volume just above that of a loud whisper. Both heads turned in his direction.

"Potter," Weasley spat. "This has nothing to do with *you*. Go hide in the dungeons!"

Harry rolled his eyes, but he was not amused. "I suggest you leave, Weasley, and don't blame my friends for something they have no control over. Keep the door to your dormitory locked if that's a problem."

"I've been telling him *that* for weeks," Hermione put it, her voice more like growl. Harry had rarely seen the Kneazle-mix since the train ride to school, but he often noticed the ginger cat hairs that covered Hermione's robes. She was obviously quite attached to the animal. Beside him, Ginny was livid. He placed a restraining hand on her shoulder; stop her from marching up and hexing Ron in the middle of the Entrance Hall. They *might* be able to resolve this without any of the parties getting a detention.

"Great, that *might* keep him safe shut up in the dorm," Ron said. "But I can't take him out anymore, and I doubt he likes being stuck in one room like that! Unfortunately, thanks to that bloody *monster*, I can't bring him with me to the Common Room for fear that he'll be killed!"

Hermione growled again, and drew her wand. "If you call Crookshanks a monster one more time-"

"*Miss Granger! Mister Weasley!*" Professor McGonagall's voice was like a whip crack, cutting through the row and freezing both participants. "I expected more of two of my Gryffindors. This isn't the first time I've caught you two going at it. Detention for both of you! There will be *no* dueling in the halls under my watch." She frowned. "Really, Miss Granger, I expected more from you." While Hermione's face reddened and she looked at the ground in shame, McGonagall turned to the Twins and Lee, who were still watching and in the process of swapping money. "Misters Weasley. Mister Jordan. *What exactly is it that you are doing?*" she demanded, eying the fistful of coins in Lee's hand that he was about to give to a smirking George."

"Lee here-"

"-is just lending us-"

"-some money for tomorrow's Hogsmeade weekend," they finished in unison. Their Head of House did not look convinced or impressed.

"Do you think me *senile*?" she asked sharply. "Ten points from Gryffindor from each of you for gambling and detention with Mr. Filch for all three of you. Miss Granger, Mister Weasley, you will serve detention tomorrow at noon with Professor Snape. He has a project he needs help with." The tone in which she said the last made it clear that whatever task Snape needed help with was not going to be pleasant.

Ron moaned. "But that's when everyone is going to Hogsmeade!" he protested. "Can't it be sometime else?"

McGonagall gave him a stern glare. "Of course not. I choose that date and time *intentionally*. That will teach you not to fight in the hallways. All of you, out!" she commanded. Hermione marched off towards where Harry and Ginny were standing, while Ron glared at her and McGonagall and stomped off angrily.

Hermione looked ready to explode. Her cheeks with pink with anger, and her eyes were blazing. Harry spoke before she could. "Let's go to the Room," he suggested quietly. "We've got things we need to discuss."

Hermione nodded, her eyes flashing in understanding. Harry still hadn't had the chance to speak with her about his conversation with Dumbledore, and she was understandably anxious to know more about her newfound abilities. She was also going to need a private place to vent. They ran up to the Seventh Floor corridor, and the door appeared. As he opened it, though, Harry was surprised to hear the clanging and clinking of colliding metal.

He pushed the door open to reveal Blaise Zabini, a plain broadsword in hand, dueling fiercely with what appeared to be an animated dummy, also wielding a sword. It moved quickly, but Blaise deflected the strikes easily. He was naked from the waist up, and sweat gleamed on his dark skin. He parried another blow, and then kicked the dummy in what would be the stomach, knocking it back. "Stop," he commanded. The dummy froze.

The boy turned to them, a wide grin on his face. “This place is bloody brilliant!” he exclaimed. “I haven’t been able to practice sword-fighting at school, and it’s made getting better a lot more difficult.”

“I didn’t know you knew how to fight like that,” Harry admitted. “How long have you been at it?”

“Since I was nine,” Blaise replied.

Harry nodded. As outdated as it seemed to be, wizards had dueled with swords in battle as recently as the War Against Grindelwald. Some experience soldiers had learned how to Transfigure their wands into swords, and when they closed for close combat, it was often much easier than firing spells at close range. Many pureblood families still learned the ancient art, but mostly for ceremonial purposes. As far as Harry knew, Daphne had had nothing more than a basic education on the subject. He’d never seen her practicing with swords before, as she preferred hand-to-hand combat when at close quarters with the enemy. Of course, few managed to close to the distance before she cut them down.

Hermione was staring at Blaise as if he’d grown an extra head. It also appeared as if she was forcing himself to keep her eyes on his face instead of gawping at his muscled chest. Blaise was obviously in excellent physical shape, not overly muscled, but solidly-built. Daphne had mentioned to Harry the previous summer that she felt it was nearing time for him to begin his physical training.

“Like what you see?” Blaise asked, smirking at the bushy-haired girl.

Hermione spluttered, turning red. “NO!...well, you are in good shape...but that’s not what I wanted to ask you,” she growled at him. She stared at the sword in his hand. “What exactly are you doing with that?”

“Training,” he replied simply. “I’m sure for a Muggleborn, it must look pretty strange for a wizard to be using a weapon that Muggles donated to museums hundreds of years ago.”

“Well, yes,” Hermione admitted. “So you’ve been doing that since you were *nine*?”

Blaise shrugged. "Dad is an excellent swordsman, thought I should give it a try. I'm pretty good now, trying to get better." He placed the sword back in a rack on the wall and walked over to a changing screen. They waited patiently, and Blaise emerged a minute later, dressed in his school robes once more. "Either of you two want to interrogate me now?" he asked. There was no hurt in his voice, merely amusement.

Harry shook his head, and then frowned. He wanted to ask Blaise to stay for the conversation that he was going to have with the girls, and he was *pretty* sure he trusted the boy. After all, he had given him access to the Room of Requirement, though in hindsight, that had been more because he was trying to impress Blaise then because he thought him a close friend. He appeared to have succeeded in that goal. The question was now how far the trust and friendship between them had developed. He made his decision. "Blaise, if you could stay for a moment. I'd like you to know something."

Both Ginny and Hermione gave him a questioning look, and Hermione's was downright accusing. "I trust him," Harry said to them. He gave a meaningful look at Blaise, and the boy, all humor gone, gave him a slow nod. Harry somehow felt safe revealing this information, but he needed to make sure of something first. "None of the information you learn in this room will leave this room, do you understand? I realize that family is important to you, but if you cannot keep this from your parents, leave now."

"I won't say anything," Blaise said, and Harry could hear the honesty in his steady voice. "I won't betray your trust in me, which does mean a great deal."

Harry felt relief wash over him. Seconds later, all four of them were seated on a pair of couches that the Room had provided. With his eyes on Hermione, he explained all of what Dumbledore had told him, with the exception of the information that he was sworn to keep secret. Somehow, the knowledge that she could get help from Professor McGonagall seemed to soothe Hermione's fears to a degree, just as Dumbledore had hoped. Blaise whistled at the end of it.

"I've got to say, I'm impressed," he said, glancing at Hermione. "I never thought you had it in you, and I don't mean that as an insult to Muggleborns or anything. You just didn't strike me as the type to possess such a gift. Shows what appearances can tell you, doesn't it?"

Hermione simply nodded. She still seemed to be trying to process all that she had heard. As he watched her, Harry suddenly had the urge to blurt out what he knew about his own power, but knew that he couldn't. None of them could protect their minds against even a casual Legilimency probe, or detect such an intrusion. The knowledge, especially given the tainted nature of Harry's magic, made it far too dangerous to share it with them. Daphne had urged him repeatedly to keep it secret until he had it at least partially under control.

*"No one can know, Harry," she had told him. "I know that you don't like keeping secrets from your friends, but this is a secret you must keep. If word gets out, your life will be in serious danger. There are far too many who will fear a teenager who possesses such power, Boy-Who-Lived or not. There will be others who will seek to use you to their own ends. I won't let that happen."*

"Harry, are you alright?" Ginny asked quietly, frowning at him. He blinked in surprise, and realized he must have drifted off for a moment. He fought to keep himself from wincing. Between his strange behavior on the Quidditch pitch and what he'd just done, he wouldn't be surprised if she was starting to wonder if he'd lost it.

"I'm fine," he assured her. He spared a glance at Blaise, but the other Slytherin boy didn't seem to have noticed. He was staring absently at a point on the far wall, and his brow was furrowed in concentration. "You still with us, Blaise?"

The boy jumped slightly, but recovered with effortless grace. "Sorry, my mind was occupied. So, Hermione, are you going to approach Dumbledore about lessons with McGonagall? It sounds like he's not going to do it unless you want to."

Hermione looked thoughtful, yet anxious. "I suppose I should. I'm sure Professor McGonagall will be able to help me, if she went

through the same things. I still can't understand why *I* of all people ended up with this sort of....*gift!*"

Blaise shrugged. "Normally, these kinds of gifts are associated with magical heirs. As you are Muggleborn, you defy the conventional wisdom. I'm sure that it will earn you respect from them regardless."

Hermione's eyes narrowed, looking downright deadly. "And if I said that I don't *want* to earn respect from those stuck-up, arrogant, racist..."

Blaise raised an eyebrow, a gesture that Harry thought was more to keep Hermione off balance than a sign that he didn't care about the bushy-haired girl's opinions. "Racist?"

"What else am I supposed to call their disdain for all things *Muggle*?" she demanded. Ginny winced. Harry kept a level gaze on his best friend. He understood her frustration with the way that purebloods treated her, despite her superior intellect and ability, but no matter how much she hated it, she wasn't going to erase hundreds of years of biases and discrimination. Rather, she was going to have to live with it and come out of it with the attitude that they were misguided, slaves to tradition. What she should *not* do was alienate Blaise, a boy belonging to a somewhat unconventional pureblood family that, although their allegiance drifted towards the Dark, had no loyalty to Voldemort or his anti-Muggle crusade. *There's also the little matter that I want to be friends with both of them, and that won't happen unless Hermione learns to get along with him...and he learns to stop antagonizing her*, he added after a brief period of thought.

"A bias?" Blaise suggested, sounding as if he was trying to be helpful, rather than offended by Hermione's rash generalization. "A superiority complex? Race tends to refer to the color of one's skin, not one's blood or ancestry, at least, not in this context. As backwards as many pureblood traditions can be, and no matter how pronounced their biases towards Muggles, which are mostly based on ignorance, by the way, wizards care little for skin color. From what I understand, that and several other personal traits have been the cause for warfare, hatred and criminal activity among Muggles." He paused, cutting off Hermione's sharp retort. "Keep in mind I realize that you know more

than I do about this kind of thing, and that I'm not speaking in general terms. But can you honestly tell me that I'm wrong?"

Hermione closed her eyes, obviously trying to return Blaise's intelligent and well-spoken argument with one of her own. It appeared that this might not turn into a shouting match. She took a deep breath. "No, I can't," she admitted. "Throughout our history, people have been murdered and imprisoned for what they believed in. I suppose I might want to think about that...but I can still object to it," she put in with a touch of indignation. "I think what Muggles have done is as despicable as what the purebloods think and do," she said strongly.

Blaise seemed to consider that. "Perhaps I'm more ignorant than I realize, but I fail to see why you are attacking *me* of all people. Our family...well, my parents can sometimes look down upon Muggles without thinking about it, and there are certain things we are far superior to them in, such as medicine and healing, but I don't think you below me because you come from a Muggle family. I've always been a bit more open-minded than my parents in that regard. You've proven yourself to me, but I warn you, some will simply refuse to be swayed, no matter how impressive your abilities are."

Hermione nodded stiffly. No one spoke. They seemed to have reached a stalemate. Blaise wasn't going to openly denounce pureblood society any more than Hermione was going to acknowledge the right of purebloods to think what they wanted about Muggleborns. Harry cleared his throat, and both looked at him. He eyed Blaise. "Would you like to practice some spellwork with us? I'm sure you know a few things that might be quite useful."

Blaise smiled, showing his teeth in a somewhat predatory grin, his competitive instincts aroused. "I'd love to," he replied.

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It had taken countless hours sitting alone inside his four-poster bed before Harry had discovered a rather important fact: One thing his advanced analytical skills were *not* good for was controlling teenage hormones.

So far, *mercifully*, the urge to snog his best friend had not yet returned. But he could still tell he felt something...*deeper* for Ginny,

more than he felt for Hermione, for one. Trying to convince himself that it was just a teenage crush, which was quite likely, just made him feel worse. She was *twelve-years* old. As embarrassing as it would be, he'd rather be enamored with an attractive girl older than him than a girl that barely reached his chest and was only a year removed from being as naïve and innocent as a person could be.

In the end, after a great deal of thought that went nowhere, he'd given up. He was *obviously* not going to act on his feelings. He couldn't imagine how one could be more of a hypocrite. Only last year, he was determined to eradicate her childhood crush on *him!* He had no idea how Ginny felt about him, and for the sake of his peace of mind, decided upon the assumption that she thought him a close friend, nothing more. If he were wrong...well, he'd deal with that later.

It was *strange*. Ginny still had the childish and immature features of a preteen, though if she was starting to mature physically, it wasn't evident to him. Nor was it his place to judge such things. It wasn't a physical attraction, really. Nor was it any kind of deep spiritual connection which was the stuff of bad romance novels. It was something else altogether, and that just made him even more confused.

So, he'd given up. Mercifully, his dreams had been plain and boring, completely unintelligible. No sign of Ginny. He might have strangled himself if she *had* been present.

One afternoon after lunch, Harry was walking through the crowded hallway of the Fourth Floor Corridor, a recently borrowed book on wizarding sword combat under one arm, when he heard a familiar voice call out his name. He turned around, trying to determine where the voice had come from in the throng of students, the loud cacophony of dozens of separate intelligible conversations making it quite difficult to accomplish. Then he saw his Defense Against the Dark Arts professor standing in the doorway he had just exited through. He felt irritated.

He'd thought over the werewolf's proposal that they get to know one another better and immediately became *very* suspicious. He understood that the relationship he had with Remus Lupin wasn't

exactly typical for a student and his teacher, but from what Daphne had told him, the man was usually quiet and withdrawn. For him to come out openly and pursue a relationship that could potentially get him fired was very out of character, and made it perfectly clear that the man had another motive.

He quickly went through a mental list of things that the man might want to speak to him about, eliminating anything as trivial as an essay or homework assignment. Those were not things for which he would track Harry down just twenty minutes before his friend's son was supposed to be down in the greenhouse for his afternoon Herbology class. And he was *sure* that Remus knew that.

He put a polite smile on his face. It wouldn't do well to assume the worst. Remus's intentions were not sinister, at least, not in the same way that Black's intentions were. Remus was concerned about Harry's well-being and far-too-mature approach that was understandably alien for a man who had at the very least not only expected to find a trace of his parent's personalities in his, but one who also had not witnessed the transformation he had made from precocious youth to calculating, analytical Slytherin teenager.

"Yes, Professor?" he asked, using the title even though Remus had told him many times to call him by his first name when they were in private. Harry declined, preferring to keep the conversation less personal than Remus wanted it to be. He simply didn't trust the man, even if he thought his intentions were good.

"Harry, how many times do I have to ask you to call me Remus?" he asked, sounding exasperated. "I'd like to speak with you on something you brought up a while ago."

Harry tried to recall what he might be referring to, and then he had it. "You want to speak with me about strategies for combating Dementors," he said, a statement, rather than a question. It was the only possible reason he could think of. Even if it wasn't what the man had intended, it sent a clear message that Harry hadn't reversed his earlier position about getting to know him as more than a simple professor.

Remus showed no signs of disappointment, only mild surprise. Probably more because Harry had managed to guess what he wanted to speak to him about than reluctance to get closer to him, Harry judged. "Actually, that's just one of a few things I'd like to discuss with you. I understand that you have a busy schedule, but I'd appreciate it if you might stop by later, perhaps after dinner."

Harry nodded politely. Remus meant well, so Harry saw no reason to refuse to meet the man. He was confident he could master the Patronus Charm on his own, assuming that he could find time. If his magic began to mature, he'd soon have a number of new spells within his capabilities. He intended to expand his repertoire as soon as possible. No matter how advanced his skills might seem he knew that a combination of private tutoring at an early age and more pressure from their parents had given most of his classmates an early head start. Blaise's proficiency at wielding a sword was evidence of this. Harry wasn't completely certain how useful such a skill was in this day and age, but he understood that he couldn't simply discard it as an anachronistic practice of a bygone era. "I'll stop by then," he said, letting a little false enthusiasm leak into his voice. He hoped it was convincing.

Remus nodded, and that was that.

Herbology was uneventful: the class was mostly comprised of a lecture about several types of moderately dangerous plants. The vast majority of the information concerned the Venomous Tentacula, a plant that recalled bad memories for Harry. Memories of his and Hermione's mad dash, wands spewing Burning Hexes, across a field of them and Creeping Thorngrass. He still shuddered at the memory of those hellish few hours. Remembering how Hermione had been seconds away from death when he felled the King, remembering the pain from his shredded legs that had been punctured by dozens of sharp thorns. Remembering Hermione's look of horror as she stared at the key that had stabbed her in the shoulder sent shivers down his spine.

They *should* have died that night, victims of their elder's complacency and their own feelings of invulnerability that pervaded the young and innocent. Those who had not yet seen what a Slicing Curse delivered

at point-blank range could do to human flesh. Those who had not yet been in a situation where their survival was only ensured by blind fate...

He shuddered again, involuntarily. He had been a *fool*, plain and simple. If he had a chance to do it over again, he would have gone to the only person guaranteed to be as wary of Quirrell as he was: Snape.

There was, of course, no guarantee that his Head of House would have believed him. He might have brushed it off as a cry for attention, a motive he would jump on in his misguided evaluation of Harry's character. But Harry probably could have used things such as the simultaneous burning of both his scar and presumably the magical tattoo seared into the inside of the man's left forearm.

Perhaps he would have failed. It didn't matter. He'd nearly sacrificed his life in a futile effort to stop the man that killed his parents. He'd justified it at the time by telling himself that he was doing it out of necessity, that he had no choice.

Suddenly, Harry wanted to kick himself. There had been a better choice than Snape, far, *far* better. *How could I possibly have forgotten Daphne?* He asked himself, stunned that it had never occurred to him to contact the woman with whom he'd spent his entire childhood. She was in Newfoundland, of course, but she might have been able to contact Dumbledore. She probably could have gotten through the obstacles faster, and would have had a much better chance than *he* did against Quirrell. The idea that he'd tried to fight the man was laughable. He, an untrained eleven-year old student against a powerful Death Eater who could call upon the recovering powers of his master. *It's incredible that I survived.*

What made it even more astounding that he'd forgotten Daphne in his haste was that at the time, the woman was a goddess to him. She gave him everything he wanted, taught him almost everything he knew about the world, took tremendous pride in his accomplishments, no matter how insignificant. She'd fed his insatiable curiosity with hundreds of articles and pieces of literature, given him the work ethic that had served him so well.

It was one thing for him to decline her aid now that he'd seen her darker side; now he knew that she was terribly flawed. But then...

It was inexplicable.

His feet stopped walking, and he realized he'd reached Remus's office. He refocused, pushing the memories of his first year into the recesses of his mind, and focusing on the task at hand. The door was slightly ajar, a long sliver of light peeking out across the dark hallway. He rapped lightly on the doorframe. "Come in," Remus called. Harry pushed the door open.

The room was slightly more organized than it had been, but was still a mess. Part of the clutter seemed to be related to the large Grindylow tank that his teacher was now leaning over, dropping small pieces of meat into the murky water. He glanced up as Harry entered. "For our next class," he explained. "Just got him, a feisty one, even for a Grindylow." Harry gazed at the side of the tank, where the creature had now pressed its face against the glass, showing sharp teeth and yellow eyes that seemed to glow with malice. "The key," Remus continued, "is his fingers. They are very brittle, and it's quite simple to break his grip—"

Harry cleared his throat. It was somewhat rude, but he really wasn't that interested in learning about a creature he'd be studying in detail the next day. He'd come because Remus wanted to discuss more important things.

Remus seemed to understand and stepped down from the small stool, closing the top of the tank as he did so. The lid glowed blue as it magically locked, preventing the escape of the Dark creature. Remus walked over to the window, staring out over the grounds. Harry waited politely, hands tucked into the pockets of his robes. He waited for Remus to begin.

The man turned back to him. "So, have you done any research on methods of combating Dementors?" he asked, starting the conversation with the more harmless topic.

Harry nodded. "I know the basics of the Patronus Charm."

Remus returned his nod. "I wouldn't expect a wizard of your age to be able to perform such advanced magic, but Daphne assures me that you should be able to master it. I can't imagine why." Harry had to keep himself from frowning. Remus sounded bitter, and obviously resented being left out of the loop. His expression softened, as if he realized that taking out his frustration on Harry was counterproductive. "So," he began anew, "how much do you know about the spell?"

Harry tried to recall what he had read. "A Patronus is a guardian of pure light, and normally takes the form of an animal that has a special significance to you. To summon it, the wizard must focus on a happy thought and use the incantation. There is no wand movement required."

Remus nodded approvingly, smiling, "Excellent," he said, sounding impressed. "You have done your reading. Alright, would you like to try it now?" he asked.

Harry frowned. "It just occurred to me: Where exactly are we going to procure a Dementor? I doubt they'll appreciate if we take one of their number to practice spells on."

Remus shook his head. "We won't be using a real Dementor, of course, Albus would never allow it. What I *have* managed to find is a Wraith. They are a cousin of Dementors, and live mostly in swampy areas in the Southern United States. They mimic the mind-rooting abilities of Dementors, though they don't produce the same feeling of cold. Nor can they perform the Kiss."

Harry nodded. He'd read about Wraiths before, in passing, but had come under the impression that they were extremely rare. Perhaps in Britain and the Continent, they were. He now understood why Remus had waited so long to teach him; he'd been trying to find a viable alternative to a Dementor. "Should I begin without the Wraith?" he asked. He felt it best if he challenged himself and worked backwards from there. It helped to have a clear goal in mind, and Harry fully expected himself to fail the first time, but knew it would be a valuable learning experience.

Remus frowned. “Are you sure?” Harry nodded vigorously, and Remus relented. “Alright, try to think of a very happy memory, the best you can think of.”

Harry nodded absently, searching through his memories. Many from his childhood fit the description, but none of them had the emotional power needed to fuel a corporeal Patronus. Then, he suddenly had it. It *wasn’t* a happy memory, not really. But the sight of Hermione Granger’s face after he woke from his ordeal on Halloween Night of 1991, and the realization that she had overcome her doubts and wanted to be his friend, his first true friend since he had arrived in Britain, was one of the most content he could locate. He closed his eyes, focusing on the conversation they had had. “I’ve got it.”

“Are you sure?” Remus asked. “I won’t ask you to tell me; it’s better that way. I’ll be ready if you need help.”

Harry nodded. “Where’s the Wraith?” he asked, looking around.

“In the classroom,” Remus said. “In the same trunk it was shipped in. I’m a bit worried that it will be quite peeved.”

“I can handle it,” Harry said with confidence. He had the memory; he had the power. He *shouldn’t* have that much difficulty with this, no matter how complex or advanced it was. He *wasn’t* any ordinary thirteen-year old wizard.

“Alright,” Remus said, with a slight tremor of nervousness in his voice. They walked down the hall to his classroom, and Harry saw that the chairs and desks had been cleared away and stacked against the wall. A plain, innocuous-looking wooden crate rested on the floor, harmless to the casual observer. Harry looked at it with a bit of trepidation, the memories of what the creature’s cousin had done to him still fresh in his mind. He fought back a shudder. He *could* do this.

Remus walked forward so that he stood behind and slightly to the left of the crate. Harry faced in straight on, flicking his wrist and arming himself. He caught Remus’s subtle noise of disapproval at his use of the Auror-issue equipment, but Harry ignored it. He focused on the task before him.

"Ready?" Remus asked. Harry nodded. Remus flicked his wand, and the crate opened.

As the Wraith emerged, Harry immediately observed several differences between the creature and its cousin. Wraiths, at least this one, were shorter, and rather than appearing as skeletal frames wearing tattered black robes, the outer skin of the Wraith conformed to its body. Unlike the Dementor, it had a face, a pair of small, glowing red eyes framed by dark gray, scaly skin. It appeared far more alive than the Guards of Azkaban. It reached out a dark hand, and Harry felt it penetrate his defenses with ease. His mother's voice shrieked in his ears.

He fought it, regaining his concentration. He immediately knew that the Wraith was meaningfully weaker than a real Dementor, as he shouldn't have been able to stop its thrust into his most frightening memories. He raised his wand, the slender piece of wood actually feeling heavier in his fingers. Concentrating with all his focus on the relief he felt when he knew his complete isolation at Hogwarts was finally over, he spoke the words. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

As Harry had expected, he had failed to produce the desired results. A cloud of smoky-grey material puffed out of the end of his wand, and the Wraith drew back as though burned. Again, Harry knew that such a feeble effort wouldn't stop a real Dementor, but for the moment, he pushed that knowledge out of his mind. Confidence filled his body and mind, and he felt his magic pulsing, awaiting release. He smiled, and raised his wand again. He didn't need to think of Hermione this time. The feeling of his magic wrapping around him like a protective cocoon, *completely* devoid of the taint that Harry knew must lie deeper, was indescribable. The pure, rich euphoria was *breathtaking*.

"**EXPECTO PATRONUM!**" He bellowed. His magic funneled perfectly through his arm and into his wand, uniting with Fawkes' feather and emitting a blaze of white light.

A large shape fell out of the end of his wand, strangely reminiscent of the serpent that Draco Malfoy had summoned in their duel a year previous. It was long and lithe; a dazzling white body covered in scales, ending with a small head, a pair of pearlescent eyes, a small

forked tongue pushing past poisonous fangs to taste the air around it. The adder shot forward as it found its prey, lunging at the Wraith. At nearly four feet, the snake-Patronus must have been an intimidating sight, as the Wraith retreated; making for the safety of the crate it had been shipped in. The top slammed shut, and the box shuddered. The snake, annoyed, turned back to Harry, slithering towards him. Still in awe, Harry extended a hand, but as he contacted the silver head, the snake faded into nothingness.

He sagged forward; feeling as if he'd just run a marathon. The feeling of bliss remained, but was slowly fading. His eyes flicked to Remus. The man was frozen, still staring at the spot where the adder-Patronus had once been, as if trying to deny what his eyes had shown him. His head turned, and he gazed, open-mouthed, eyes wide at Harry. Suddenly, Harry realized with a jolt that Remus's eyes were *amber*. But as soon as he realized this, they faded back to blue.

For a long moment, neither one of them spoke. Neither Harry nor Remus could quite understand or believe what they had just seen. Hope rushed through him, hope that Daphne had been wrong, that he might be able to handle his new power, that...that he might be able to experience that feeling *again...*

Remus broke the silence. "That," he said, his voice quiet and almost reverent, "was the most incredible thing I have ever seen." He eyes bored into Harry's, and once more flashed amber. He blinked. "I felt it," he said, his eyes still locked with his student's. "I felt the power, the tremendous amounts of magic that you wield. I can't understand how I missed it."

"Daphne blocked my access to it," Harry explained. "It's been getting around those barriers, though."

"Magic is a strange thing," Remus said, in a voice that didn't quite sound like it was his own. "It's as if the magic we all possess is *alive*, a separate, conscious being. But this..."

Remus closed his eyes, and appeared to be trying to calm himself. "I understand," he said, his eyes still wide. "I understand what Daphne has been trying to tell me. You are like *nothing* I've ever seen."

He walked forward, and Harry nearly jumped when he seized his hand tightly. "I'll help you, Harry. I'll do *anything* for you."

And from the tone in his voice, Harry knew that he meant every word.

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A/N: Interesting chappie. This one was a bit shorter than the latest ones have been, but flowed very naturally. Blaise's skill with a sword sort of just jumped out of my mind onto the page, and since I have some huge events planned involving swords, it seemed to work well. Also, more light shed on how Blaise and Hermione look at each other...from a purely societal perspective, of course...

As for Harry and Ginny. No, this isn't a case of them both being too clueless to realize that they are deeply in love. They aren't even close. At the moment, Ginny has no romantic feelings of any kind for Harry, and Harry is trying to sort out his attraction, not his deep infatuation. It obviously isn't the same kind of thing he had for Cho, though it's related to the onset of puberty. Oh joy!

Remus finally understands what Daphne has been trying to tell him, and Harry's patronus is...Nagini? Same species of snake, anyway. Rest assured their are reasons behind that. I thought of doing a basilisk, but the things too damn big, and I've seen someone else do it in the past. You see thebenign side of Harry's power as well. Interpret his euphoria as you will, some of you are bound to make snide comments.

No, I haven't forgotten Pettigrew. And I figure that even without Sirius guiding him, Crookshanks will be suspicious of Scabbers. This is a conflict that's been going on behind the scenes, but Hermione didn't find it important enough to bring to her friend's attention. Rest assured that the fact that she got a detention might change that. The sun will freeze over before Ron and Hermione get together. Her distaste for him is even worse than it is for Draco, because it's personal. And I'd never dream of putting Hermione and Draco together. I find it the stupidest, bad-romance-novel-like, most unlikely pairing imaginable, and that includes Harry and Susan Bones. Draco, the noble, caring boyfriend...Yeucch!

Ginny's issues are mostly a crisis of confidence rather than a lack of ability.

As for the reviews, I think I need to be clearer. I don't in any way mind speculations, questions, or guesses as to where this series and book is going. The only thing that irks me is people complaining while assuming things that haven't happened yet. Or complaining that I leave the boundaries of canon. People also wonder why I care so much about reviews. I'll reiterate it: Sirius's misguided plan to abduct Harry was *suggested* by a reader. Your ideas will sometimes tickle my fancy, and I'll incorporate some of them in some form in future writing. I don't mean to scare people off.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

## Chapter 14: Disagreements

Harry Potter was angry.

He hadn't been surprised when, as he sat awaiting the beginning of Defense of the Dark Arts, Severus Snape, complete with billowing black robes and menacing expression, had burst through the door and marched up to the front of the classroom, sneering at the open-mouthed Gryffindors as he strode up the aisle to Remus's desk. He spun on a heel, his expression, as usual, malevolent, intended to inspire fear, and thus insure obedience. Gryffindors, small-minded as many of them were, thought he just did it because he liked tormenting students...

On second thought, Harry realized that might not actually be untrue. Snape relied on his reputation as a person who might take an unruly student, chop them up into various potions ingredients, and use them in Healing Potions for other students in the same way that McGonagall relied on her reputation for strictness.

Regardless, any reluctant admiration or respect he might have had for Snape vanished the instant he read the heading of the chapter Snape had just commanded them to read. Harry shook with rage, disgusted by this *childish* behavior that Snape and Remus both performed on a regular basis. He could understand James, and he couldn't object if Snape wanted to torture Black by pulling out his toenails, but Remus was easily the most innocent of the Marauders.

What was worse was that this had moved past a simple game of one-upmanship, a practice that as a Slytherin, Harry considered a very important part of verbal sparring. But this was going too far. Snape wasn't just trying to strike back at the ghosts of his past; he was betraying Dumbledore's trust and trying to get a good man *fired*. His eyes sought out Snape, who was sitting at Remus's desk, disgusted looks crossing his face as he rifled through a stack of essays. The man seem to realize that Harry was looking at him, and slowly, deliberately, raised his head so that his dark eyes locked with Harry's. A voice came into his head.

*Say nothing, Potter. This isn't about you.*

Harry nodded stiffly, and read the chapter. While most of the information was basic information he already knew, there were several interesting passages towards the end of the chapter.

*...Werewolves suffer from many types of inaccurate stereotypes and prejudices, but there is one misconception that might actually cause some to fear them even more. Most wizards that know the basics of Lycanthropy make the inaccurate assumption that it is only the full moon that will summon the ‘wolf’ from the depths of a werewolf’s subconscious. This is incorrect.*

*First, studies have shown that the transformation is triggered regardless of whether or not a werewolf can actually see the full moon. Once the moon reaches its highest point, the transformation is triggered. Many werewolves, fearful of Biting or harming others, will seal themselves in confinement for the duration of a full moon. This has been shown to be harmful, though, as many werewolves will bite and scratch themselves in an effort to satisfy their bloodlust. As already documented, a werewolf not administered the rare and expensive Wolfsbane Potion loses the capacity for conscious, rational thought, and is fully dominated by the wolf consciousness. Because it is impossible to determine the exact time that the full moon will reach its highest point in the sky, if you know or suspect you may be near a place where a werewolf is transforming, LEAVE IMMEDIATELY. Some werewolves underestimate their own strength, and will sometimes escape their chosen confinement. Few have the luxury of being able to run free in an area where other wizards and Muggles are not at risk.*

*The other ‘uncommon’ misconception is that werewolves are perfectly normal except for one day a month. Besides the side-effects of transformation, which can last up to a week and include debilitating soreness, weakness, and lack of appetite, the wolf will occasionally be aroused by certain stimuli. Normally, these stimuli are events or experiences that activate certain primal instincts. This includes strong emotions and feelings such as anger and protectiveness. A starved werewolf, even in human form, can become ‘feral’ and lose rational thought, though such an occurrence is rare.*

*It is quite simple to determine if the wolf has been aroused. Normally, this condition is associated with the eyes of a werewolf shifting to a shade of amber. A darker shade of amber has been associated with strong rage. The voice of an angry werewolf will often sound like a growl...*

A few pages later, Harry found something he hadn't known anything about.

*A little known fact about werewolves, something that makes them extremely dangerous, is that they have the ability to sense powerful magic. While normally relying on their enhanced senses of smell and hearing, it is speculated that werewolves will occasionally use this sense to hunt.*

aHarry

The description was brief and maybe only he, a few of the Slytherins, a Ravenclaw or two, and Hermione would have been interested in it, but he immediately decided he'd have to ask Remus for a pass into the Restricted Section. He only hoped the man's renewed loyalty to him might allow Harry to get by without telling him what he was looking for. He didn't like to use Remus like that, but he didn't really have a choice. He also needed to write Daphne and tell her about the Patronus. He was also hoping she wouldn't be too alarmed by the ease with which Harry's magic had slipped through the barriers she had erected. As for the Patronus itself, an adder, a deadly magical snake usually associated with Dark wizards, well, there was another, more unsettling problem. Voldemort's familiar had been an adder, actually, there had been several of them. The most recent of which was a massive creature named Nagini, that had disappeared at the same time as his master. It only confirmed Dumbledore's theory of about Harry's tainted magic.

Harry wasn't completely sure how he felt about the fact that while he possessed tremendous magical power, it was also imbued with the essence of one of the most powerful Dark Lords in Wizarding history. He was proud of his power, proud of his destiny. He was modest, he felt, in the sense that he didn't believe he'd accomplished very much of note on his own. But he could see a future, a world without

Voldemort, where he stood in Dumbledore's shoes, looked up to by all, considered a shining beacon of the Light, ready to deal with any threats that might come his way. He knew he had the ability, but he needed time to develop it.

Perhaps a less experience person Harry's age might be frightened by both what was to come and the tremendous and dangerous power he already wielded, but Harry understood that for now, it was not something he should worry about. With the exception of Black, who appeared to be a lone actor, the Wizarding world was at peace. It was not Harry's job to fight Black, it was his job to survive and allow his elders to stop the man. He didn't have anything to prove, not yet. *Well, that's not completely accurate, Harry thought, I have a great deal to prove. I simple have no need to do it now. I am comfortable with the wizard that I am.*

His mind settled, Harry returned to the werewolf reading. He finished it quickly, and noticed that a number of other students had done the same. About halfway through the double period, Snape ordered the class to shut their books and proceeded to give a lecture on the material combined with random questions to test their knowledge. As usual, he focused on the Gryffindors. Hermione had learned that Snape didn't care if she knew the answer; he much rather embarrass the unfortunate student by giving them the answer in a tone that implied it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Neville Longbottom was, as always, Snape's constant target. No matter how much Harry tried to boost the boy's self-esteem and force him to disregard the unfair comparisons drawn between him and his parents, the boy's memory was still like a leaky cauldron. He could remember any and all kinds of plants and their properties, and by association, a number of potions. And once he learned a spell and became proficient with it, he tended to remember it; however, recently learned information didn't sink in without a great deal of repetition. He also tended to panic when he didn't immediately think of an answer, rather than using what he could remember to arrive at the correct response. His fear of Snape only intensified his problems. He stuttered pathetically, turning red from both the snickers of the Slytherins and even some Gryffindors, while cowering in fear as if he expected Snape to hex him for a wrong answer.

Snape concluded the class by writing their assignment for the weekend on the board. Harry felt a fresh surge of rage as Snape assigned two rolls of parchment on the way to recognize and *kill* werewolves. Harry knew that this had been in their curriculum, but it had also been meant for much later in the year. Harry had a feeling that if Theodore Nott or someone similar noted the parallels, they might keep it quiet. Should Draco Malfoy or Pansy Parkinson be observant enough to notice Remus's gaunt appearance, monthly disappearances around the full moon, and other 'wolf-like' quirks of body language and posture, they would be all too happy to reveal their discovery. The other sign, of course, was the normally horrific scar from the Bite, though Remus, like most werewolves, hid it beneath his clothing. It was not something one wanted to advertise.

Class was dismissed and Ron Weasley and a number of the Gryffindors immediately began moaning about the long essay. Harry was amused that the redhead didn't even ponder the fact that Remus would resume teaching on Monday, and that the odds were that he'd cancel the assignment. Then he realized that since Ron didn't know Remus was a werewolf, it was impossible for him to predict how long Snape would be teaching them.

Putting Weasley out of his mind, Harry was about to follow Hermione, who seemed to be a bit peeved at him for something, out the door, when Snape's voice called out, "Potter, stay for a moment."

Harry turned back. Snape was organizing the papers on his desk.  
"Yes?"

He looked at Harry for a moment, unblinking. "I will warn you just once to not question my choice of subject. I think I make myself clear?"

Harry nodded stiffly.

"Good," Snape said, pausing. "Have you been practicing your Occlumency?"

Harry hesitated. He had, but not nearly as much as he should have been. Before he could answer, Snape scowled at him in disgust. "I am doing you a *favor*, Potter. The Headmaster could just as easily

instruct you, but both of us feel that my teaching style will prepare you much better for a real mental attack. That does *not* mean I will tolerate laziness. You will meet with me Saturday night at eight o'clock for our next lesson. Do not be late."

"Yes, sir," Harry replied politely.

"Also, Potter..." Snape trailed off, as if searching for the right words. "How do you feel about your performance this year in Potions?"

Harry had been prepared for a number of questions, but this one caught him off guard. "What...what do you mean, sir?"

Snape glared at him. "What do you *think*, boy? It's a fairly straight forward question. You sound like Longbottom trying to answer one of my 'queries'."

Harry felt a flash of anger at Snape's mocking of the easily-unnerved Gryffindor, but didn't allow his emotions to show. "I think I've performed well, sir. I believe I've been near the top of my class." Harry, while he didn't find the class as fascinating as Elisha Moon, still enjoyed the challenge of brewing difficult potions. It required an attention to detail, precision, and detailed knowledge of what ingredient did what.

Snape nodded carefully. "You have. I'm quite...*impressed* by your aptitude, Potter. I believed you'd be as abysmal at the subject as your father."

Harry gave him a level stare, not caring if he was giving Snape a chance to sneak through his defenses. He tried to prop them up, just in case. "I believe you've seen the error of that thinking," he said, keeping his eyes locked with Snape's.

"Quite," the man said simply. He paused. "But the reason that I'm telling you this is that I believe that you deserve to be challenged at a higher level than the rest of the dunderheads in the class. That is why you and Miss Moon will be receiving private tutoring from me, and working on different potions during class. I expect you to struggle, as some of these give even seventh-year students problems."

Harry frowned slightly. "What about Hermione?" he asked, trying to sound curious instead of demanding. "Her marks are as good as mine."

Snape sneered at him. "While your concern for Miss Granger is touching, rest assured that I have my reasons. Among them is that she relies more on memory and focus than actual talent. You, I believe, are one of the few that can develop a true *feel* for potions."

Harry nodded. "Thank you, sir," he said. "I'm honored."

Snape's dark eyes gave away a hint of annoyance. "Flattery is not *flattering*, Potter," he said slowly. "I suggest you thank me and leave."

Harry nodded. "Thank you, sir," he said, completely meaning it. He understood how difficult it was to earn a compliment from Snape. This was one *hell* of a compliment.

"Saturday night, Potter," Snape reminded him, then gathered up the papers on the desk. Harry took this as his cue to leave.

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Harry emerged from the Restricted Section, a battered red book under one arm. Remus had been understandably leery about giving Harry permission to check out a book that described werewolves and lycanthropy in *far* greater detail than their textbook did, but eventually he'd given in. He'd actually recommended the book as the most accurate and least-biased he'd heard of. Remus didn't quite understand why Harry was so interested in them, and if he was completely honest with himself, Harry wasn't sure either. He simple knew that he wanted to know more about how werewolves operated, their physiology, and their abilities. He was especially intrigued by the possibility that werewolves might use their special senses to track the magic of their prey. Obviously, no experiments could ever be held to test this theory.

There was another subject he was interested in researching; actually, it was a specific book about Hippogriffs that Hagrid had recommended. Harry had only been able to get the recommendation by listening to Hagrid shower him with apologies and degrade his own judgment. Harry had tried to explain that it wasn't really his fault,

but Hagrid refused to hear it. As it was the second time that Harry had nearly died under his watch, Harry couldn't exactly blame him for being so inconsolable.

Walking over to the shelves dedicated to magical creatures, Harry located the book he was looking for. Madam Pince had managed to cast a spell on a certain quill so that it could tell someone exactly where to find a certain book, down to the shelf and how many books it was from the ends. Locating *Pegasus Cheval's Definitive Guide to the Hippogriff*, an old, leather-bound volume with faded gold lettering, Harry Summoned a footstool over to where he was standing. He climbed onto it, and pulled out the book. Stepping down, he was about to leave when he had the feeling he was being watched. Confirming his suspicions was the very familiar voice that came from behind him. "We need to talk."

Harry turned around slowly and saw Hermione standing there, hands on her hips. She looked even more annoyed than she had been lately, and but there was also a strange aspect of reluctance and indecision. Harry frowned. "About what?"

"Not here," she said simply. She bit her lip. "Unless you'd rather the *entire school* knew about my...talents," she said with an accusing tone.

Harry frowned, staring at her. "Of course I don't. I respect your privacy."

"Humph!" Hermione huffed. Harry was surprised. He'd expected to see Hermione staring at the floor, regretting both her choice of words and her tone. It was clear she regretted neither and was angry with him that he could figure out what she wanted to speak with him about.

"What...?"

"*Not here*," she growled softly. "The Room. Now."

Harry frowned, but followed her out of the library. They traveled up three floors, not exchanging a word as Harry followed Hermione to the Seventh Floor Corridor. She paced in front of the hidden entrance, not meeting Harry's eyes. His confusion deepened. He tried to think

of what she was so angry at him about...surely *this isn't about Blaise...*

He was only partially wrong. As soon as the door appeared, he followed Hermione inside. The room resembled the one that they had used in their discussion the previous weekend. No sooner had he entered than she gestured for him to sit. Surprisingly, she remained standing.

They were both silent for a long moment. Harry was about to say something to his friend when she locked eyes with him. He was taken aback by the rage in her brown eyes, rage directed at *him*. Her words were heavy with sarcasm, but Harry could hear the underlying hurt. "What, exactly, did you mean by telling Blaise *everything*?" she demanded.

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but she silenced him with a gesture. "No, let me speak. Listen, then I'll let you defend yourself. Merlin knows you'll have to." She paused, and her eyes hardened. "Let me get this out: I am *frightened* by my new 'talent.' I almost *killed* you, *twice*—"

"Hermione..."

"*Shut up!*" she snapped, her voice cracking like a whip. "You betrayed my trust, revealed *my* secrets without consulting *me* first, and then acted as if it was nothing. I don't trust Blaise, and it's not just because he's a pureblood. Like it or not, Harry, he's a Dark Wizard."

Harry bolted upright. "Stop," he said, his voice full of anger. "First, Hermione, he isn't a Dark Wizard because he hasn't *declared* yet," he said, counting his points on his fingers. "Second, I *know* about his parents. And I don't care. Dark doesn't mean the same thing as *evil*, Hermione. You, of all people, need to learn to understand that, and soon. Because I can't be friends with both of you if you are constantly at each other's throats—"

"Do you even give one *thought* to how he, after two years of keeping his distance, suddenly took a liking to you? Have you even *considered* that he might have *another* motive entirely? Like getting close to you because his parents told him to?"

Harry blew out a breath. “As a matter of fact, I have,” he said. “And furthermore, Blaise *admitted* it,” he continued. The look of disbelief on Hermione’s face was surprising. Her surprise turned to outrage.

“Have you lost your *mind*? Or has finding allies for some bloody war that hasn’t even *started yet* become more important than being careful? Or is keeping the confidence of your friends too *inconvenient*?”

Harry stood up, his shoulders stiffening. “You *know* that isn’t true.”

Hermione placed her hand on her hips in challenge. “Really? Then why did you reveal *my* secret to someone you can’t even *trust*? Daphne would be *horrified!*” she cried, her voice a hysterical shrill cry. She threw her arms in the air to emphasize her point.

Harry glared at her. “That might be *true*,” he said slowly. “If I didn’t *trust* him. As it is, I think of him as a friend, and believe that he can be of a great help to us. I trust him, and believe that he won’t report everything he hears to his parents.”

Hermione wasn’t fazed. “Even if that is true, and you *can* trust him, which I don’t believe you can, the question remains: What exactly did you think you were doing betraying me like that? If I wanted someone else to know, I’d have *said* so! I thought you were better than this! Only...*Ron* would be this dense!”

Harry’s eyes darkened at the comparison to his former tormentor. “Because I thought he could *help*. And because I felt he had as much of a right to know as Ginny and I did.”

“Then you were *wrong!*” she screamed at him. “Especially because you didn’t even mention *your* secret!” she yelled, pointing an accusing finger at him.

All attempts at hiding his shock at this accusation were in vain. He jerked back, jaw dropping. “W-w-what are talking about?” he asked, knowing how pathetic he was and cursing all the secrecy he was forced to use.

Hermione's eyes darkened. "You know *exactly* what I'm talking about. The reason that you feel the need to gather not friends, but *allies*, at the age of *thirteen*. The reason you were not only able to execute a Patronus Charm on your second try, but create a *Corporeal Patronus* while facing a *wraith*, a cousin of a creature you *fainted* in the presence of. This reason that Professor Lupin is in awe of you. The reason you've become so damn overconfident and ambitious. The secret that you are so much more unwillingly to tell than *mine*." She gasped for breath at the end of her rant.

Harry took in his own deep breath, trying to calm Hermione with his words. "There's more than one, but you are right," he said. "I shouldn't have been so thoughtless, and I should have considered the fact that you don't trust Blaise. I'm sorry for making you feel so...uncomfortable and betraying your trust."

Hermione threw her hands in the air, pacing around like a caged lioness. "I don't *believe* you! You are *dense* enough to think that all I was looking for was a bloody *apology!* I want *answers*, Harry! And I want them *now!*" She punctuated her final word by slamming down a fist on the arm of the couch Harry had been sitting on.

Harry sucked in a breath between clenched teeth. "I can't give them to you, Hermione. I wish I could, but I can't." He was almost pleading now. For a brief moment, it looked like Hermione was going to let him off the hook, but abruptly, she shook her head.

"No!" she yelled. "I'm not going to accept that! Don't you *trust* me? Don't you trust *Ginny*?"

Harry felt his cheeks warm at the mention of his other best friend, something he tried to ignore. "Of course I do," he said in a much quieter voice. "And I would tell you if I wasn't concerned that you might be in serious danger because of it."

Hermione stared at him in disbelief. "Danger? Danger? HOW IS IT THAT YOU CARE EVER SO MUCH ABOUT OUR SAFETY, AND DON'T GIVE A FLYING FUCK ABOUT YOUR OWN?" she screamed.

Harry was taken aback once more by her fury. It was obvious that she'd been bottling this up for a *long* time. He opened his mouth to

speak, but no words came out. He knew she was right, even if that didn't really make a difference.

"Hermione—"

"NO!" she screamed, slamming her fist down on the table she'd wandered over to, shaking it so much that a pair of teacups fell to the ground and shattered. "I'm not going to let you get away with this. In fact, I'm not going to speak to you again until you tell us *everything*."

"She won't agree to that," Harry said, his voice quavering with desperation. Because he had a bad feeling that Ginny might feel the same way.

Hermione laughed at him, no humor present in her almost-hysterical cackle. It was *deeply* unnerving. "You'd be surprised. Now get out!"

As he left, feeling almost lightheaded from shock, he heard a muffled sob as the door closed.

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If Harry had learned something about Hermione in the two-and-a-half years that he'd known her, it was that she *never* went back on her word, except for the most desperate of circumstances. And, true to her word, she refused to speak, even refused to look him in the eye from then on.

The worst part was that Ginny had taken to pretending that he didn't exist. He somewhat regretted not getting to her before Hermione did, but somehow knew that Hermione wouldn't take kindly to his attempts to turn the redhead against her. Ginny spoke freely to Luna, Anne and even Daphne Greengrass, but hadn't even given him a smile in almost a week. And Harry was getting lonely.

Remus was greatly puzzled as to the reasons for Harry's sudden isolation, but he refused to admit the true reason. The urge to tell his friends everything was overpowering and he'd admitted as much to Daphne in his last letter home, a massive piece of literature detailing everything from his conversation with Dumbledore to his latest problem.

Occlumency with Snape hadn't been much better. Distracted and uncertain about whether to tell his friends the truth, at least, what he knew, while at the same time trying to keep it from Snape had proved impossible. Fortunately, it appeared that Snape was unsurprised as he found the memory of Tonks smashing into the wall of the dueling room, suggesting that Dumbledore had told him, something which made sense in light of the fact that Snape would learn of it eventually on his own. Harry was making progress, though it was slow. Snape commented on his distraction, but wasn't nasty or ill-tempered, simply irritated by Harry's inability to even delay him for a meaningful amount of time.

As for the additional Potions lessons, he'd told Harry that he and Elisha Moon would meet the next Thursday night and discuss what he had planned for them. Harry decided he'd take it as both an opportunity to learn more and a chance to find out more about Moon, a girl who said little and remained an enigma to most of the Slytherins. Potions was her passion, that was obvious. Snape spoke of her in the more glowing terms than Harry had ever heard him use when describing a student.

Currently he sat in the library, alone, as he had been for most of the day. Well, he hadn't really been alone, but with Hermione ignoring him, she might as well have not been there. He stared out the window, out at the setting sun. It was nearing time for dinner, but his stomach roiled, probably from the stress of trying to make such a difficult decision. So engrossed in his thoughts, Harry failed to notice the girl that sat down in the chair only three feet away from his. He jumped when she spoke.

"You know, eating well helps you make important decisions. If you are hungry, your brain doesn't have the fuel it needs, and is more vulnerable to Heliopaths. I suppose you weren't eating last year when you were invaded by the Heliopath known as 'Tom Riddle'...a very strange name, Riddle. I wonder if he'll ever marry a girl with the surname of 'Answer'? They could name the child '*Algorithm*,' or 'Algy' for short..."

Harry turned his head, blinking in confusion. Luna sat calmly, her hands folded in her lap. Her dirty-blonde hair was curled and ran

down over her shoulders, and her wand was tucked behind her left ear, something that caused Harry to blink again. “Don’t you usually have that behind your *right* ear?”

Luna grinned at him. “I’ve been waiting for someone to notice that, but you’re the first. It’s funny, you know. A lot of people will search forever for things, until they are consumed by swarms of Nargles that reduce them to a skeleton, only to find out that what they were looking for was right in front of them. Father has tried to use the same approach with the Crumple-Horned Snorkacks, but to no avail.” She sighed, sounding disappointed. “He’s away again, searching in the Alps of Switzerland. He’s been called all manner of things there, but he doesn’t speak any French. I bet they are calling him ‘wonderful’ and ‘brilliant’ and...”

Harry shook his head. “Luna,” he asked, “can you stop talking about Snorkacks. I appreciate that you want to speak with me, but can it be about something more...relevant.”

Luna frowned. “You are very stupid sometimes; did you know that, Harry Potter?”

Harry glared at her. “*Really?* I hadn’t guessed.”

Luna waved a finger at him. “There’s no need to be *rude*, Harry,” she chastised. “After all, I know exactly why you are up here...and why Ginevra and Hermione won’t speak to you. That’s *also* rather stupid.”

Harry simply gave her a look of resignation. “I understand why they are doing it. I’ve been hiding a great deal from them, in the hopes of protecting them, and also not making them worry so much about me. But when Hermione said that I seem to care more about their safety than my own, she’s wrong. I’ve just adapted the attitude that I just need to avoid taking unnecessary risks. I can’t control if a Hippogriff wants to maul me.”

“You know, if you keep that up, you’ll die a rather premature death,” Luna said, absolutely seriously. Her normally glassy blue eyes were as focused as Harry had ever seen them. “You really do need to watch out for yourself. This is about far more than just you and your friends. The fate of the Wizarding world rests on your well-being. You

have a commitment to them, and your ambition makes you eager for the destiny that you know lies ahead. You are *too* determined, so much so that you are overlooking the smaller things. I've tricked you for this entire conversation, because you aren't paying *full* attention."

Harry blinked wildly, staring around, expecting some kind of trick or something, but Luna sat calmly on the chair. Then, she *vanished*.

"I *told* you," Luna said. Harry spun around, and saw that she was leaning against a bookshelf at least ten feet from where he'd last seen her.

Harry's jaw dropped. "How...?"

Luna waved finger at him, as if disciplining an unruly child. "If you'd been fully *here*, you might have noticed that I've been standing here the *entire time*, even when I was using the illusion to trick you."

Harry gaped at her in disbelief. She smiled strangely. "It's come to me, recently, in small bursts. The time that I tricked you into coming to me was the first time I managed it. It's easy, now that I understand what to do. I can see inside people's minds, read their thoughts as easily as one might a book. It's quite simple to show them what I *want* them to see. Father was *proud*." She beamed, as if praise from her father was the highest honor a person could receive. Based on her insistence on believing in the same ridiculous rumors and fallacies that her father perpetuated through his publication, she probably *did* think that way.

"You can't be serious," Harry said, his voice shaking. He shook his head in shock. "I've never heard of *anyone* having that ability. There are Illusionists, of course; Blaise's father is one. But the ability to so easily influence the perceptions of others, to implant suggestions...to manipulate minds..."

Luna nodded, smiling slyly. "And people think that I'm harmless. Little old Loony Lovegood." She snickered slightly, something Harry had never heard of her doing before. But, abruptly, her expression changed to completely serious. "But you've still got larger problems. All you are doing is deluding yourself. They are in danger merely from being around you. Perhaps you've failed to consider the possibility

that they may be better off knowing what to expect. After all, why would a malevolent Legilimens target *them* first? Why not *you*? It's not like you can protect yourself much better than they can."

"But I can detect a mental intrusion," Harry protested. "Someone could pick the information from their minds without them picking it up."

Luna shrugged. "Perhaps, though I think an aware person can detect a deep mental attack regardless of training. Assuming they are determined to protect your secrets, they are no more vulnerable than you are? And if you subscribe as I do to the theory that humans are like Kneazles and have only thirteen lives, you've lost, by my count...seven."

Harry froze. "First of all, I thought it was *nine*—"

Luna shook her head dismissively. "No, that's for cats, and that's just a stupid Muggle superstition."

"And this isn't?"

She shook her head again, the silver, turtle-shaped pendant she wore around her neck shaking in concert. Harry was struck by the thought that he'd never noticed it before. "No, many *credible* Wizarding researchers have performed studies, and found that the average individual can only survive twelve near-death experiences."

Feeling ridiculous for keeping this conversation going, Harry regardless asked, "How exactly does one *measure* that?"

Luna's voice softened to a whisper, as if she was giving away some coveted secret. "The Ministry destroyed all the records. Father says they were afraid that the findings predicted the deaths of a number of valuable accountants."

Harry forced a nod. Luna was, strange as it sounded, the only person that could help him right now. This kind of situation was alien to Blaise, and a stupid, stubborn part of Harry refused to go to him so as to prove Hermione's accusation that he cared more about his relationship with Blaise, and the benefits it might provide, than his

relation with her, whom he had come to think of as being as close as a sister, albeit in a different vein than the older Tonks. So if he was to get the answer to his predicament from Luna, he had to be an active participant in this nonsensical conversation.

Playing along, he counted off mentally the near-death experiences he'd had...and fell short by two. "But, Luna," he said, realizing how ridiculous what he was about to say sounded, "I've only nearly died five times." He ticked them off on his fingers, and could only imagine the look Remus would have on his face if he was watching and listening right now. Let alone Hermione... "The troll, the Forest, Quirrell's Killing Curse, The Chamber and the duel with Daphne, and the Hippogriff."

Luna shook her head. "You also fell from a broom and Riddle could have killed you at any time he felt like it." Harry nodded in agreement, but found himself conflicted on which was more unnerving: the fact that Luna had just spoke about two things he'd never actually told her about in any detail, or that her speech was so *normal*. He could have never imagined what lay behind the glassy blue eyes of Luna Lovegood. Yet, at the same time, the enigmatic, just plain *strange* personality she projected on an everyday basis was not a mere *façade*. *It* was as much a part of *her* as was the magical prodigy that was speaking to him right now. She had *chosen* to be like that, and with her unique outlook on life, Harry was in no position to criticize that choice.

"I knew it," she said suddenly. "You are even worse than I thought!"

That froze the gears in Harry's head. He turned to look at her in disbelief. "What?"

"People call me *strange*," she began, with a never-before-heard tone laced with sarcasm. "Yet you treat death as one would an upcoming exam. No wonder Ginevra and Hermione won't speak to you. You've taken *arrogance* to a whole new level."

Indignation and outrage at the way *she* of all people had the *gall* to criticize the life that his destiny had forced on him boiled within him. He was about to vocalize a scathing retort, but suddenly she broke out laughing. It contained about as much genuine amusement as

Snape had compassion for the weak. “I don’t *believe* you!” she cried, obviously reading his thoughts. “You still think the way you are handling this is *reasonable*! It’s quite *pathetic*, really; rather than grinding your belief in your own invulnerability to dust, it’s just reinforced it! You have *no* idea what the Prophecy means!”

Harry felt a cold sweat break on his forehead, but she reassured. “Do you really think I didn’t cast a powerful Silencing Charm before I started talking? I might not have the Sight, but I’m no fool.”

Harry had to nod at that. But the fear of detection was only one of the things making him panic. Luna knew *too much*.

“Do I?” she asked, walking over and this time actually plopping down on the chair he’d been deceived into thinking she was sitting in. “And why exactly is that a *bad* thing?”

“Because I deserve to have secrets!” Harry blurted out, turning bright red.

Luna’s grin became downright predatory. “And so does Hermione. But you don’t seem to care about that much, do you.” She leaned closer, magic flooding from within her, the air crackling with power. “I could make you jump off the Astronomy Tower if I wanted to, you know? *I* have control. You don’t. You aren’t ready to become a leader. You are a *child*.”

Harry sank back in his chair, and Luna scooted the chair even closer, bending so their faces were just inches from each other. Her blue eyes were cloudy, but Harry could feel the *malevolence* she exuded. He suddenly wished Daphne were with him.

Luna smiled again, leaning back, and let out another bark of laughter. “And so it all comes back to *Daphne*. *Daphne* who sees so much in you. *Daphne*, who hopes *you* can be the leader, the beacon of Light that she *couldn’t*. She’s hurting you more than she knows. Filling your head with delusions of grandeur, turning a storm of ambition and desire for power into a tempest. Do you know where that will lead you?”

Harry shook his head. The predatory grin returned, and her eyes sparkled with anticipation. She leaned forward again, as Harry sank back, and their eyes locked, their magic swelling and joining. And she brushed him aside as if it was *nothing*.

The library faded into nothingness...

*He was down in a crouch on a scorched and blasted wooden floor. Around him, the stone walls of the basement were blackened and burned. Rain poured down through the holes blow in the ceiling. Blood trickled from several minor woods on his arms and legs, and his shattered forearm burned, but he could feel none of this, nor the dozens of aches and pains he was experiencing. He could not see the ashen-faced men and women around him, determinedly pulling the tortured and gutted corpses of their comrades off the torture racks lining the walls, the last victims of Lord Voldemort's Reign of Terror, ended in a spectacular confrontation that had cost the lives of thousands on both sides.*

*In front of him, the life gone from her brown eyes, was Ginny Weasley. She was older, much older than the wide-eyed, naïve child she had been back when Sirius Black had been on the run from the Ministry. She had grown into a beautiful young woman, though not to be described as gorgeous by most. But now, her body burned and broken from days of torture from Voldemort's most sadistic Death Eaters, Death Eaters that Harry had tortured and executed personally to the last, that was far from his mind. He was battered, but not broken. The Ministry was in a shambles, and a massive power vacuum existed. He would not allow the inefficient bureaucracy that had cost so many lives because of their indecision to rule again. He would have power. He would ensure that his friends had not died in vain.*

*Power flooded through his body, renewing him, strengthening him. The last of the Light vanished from his blackened and twisted soul. No more...*

*He stood, and his dulled, murky green eyes began to change colors, shifting to a Hellish yellow-black, seeming to burn with inner fury. He embraced the Darkness, his hatred for those who had massacred*

*and tortured without remorse. Their deaths would just be the beginning. While the crimes of Fudge and his compatriots might have been far less heinous, they were equally unforgivable. Incompetence led to only one thing: Death.*

*A much older, battled-hardened Tonks, tears still streaking down her face from the death of her lover hours previously from a bobby trap, a trap he'd triggered by his own carelessness, met his eyes, and froze. Tonks. She had allowed the Compound to be infiltrated by an enemy. She had allowed her own attachments to the people under her command to get others killed in a vain attempt to save those she loved. She had no place in his new order.*

*He need not speak the words; he'd grown far too powerful for that. And so she was the first of his former allies and friends to fall by his hand, executed for crimes of ignorance, stupidity, and incompetence. The bodies mounted. Only the greatest were fit to rule...*

*He loosed another jet of instant death, laughing in amusement at their screams, while at the same time, memories of his fallen friends brought bitter tears to his eyes. Seamus. He had failed to reinforce Hermione in time, and she had died, alone, with the rest of her force. His screams were melodious to his ears. Next he turned to Susan Bones, who had failed to protect Trelawny and her priceless memory, had sown the seeds for the devastating setback at Gorgon's Gorge that had cost him another friend, Blaise Zabini, and some of his most trusted allies. He had been forgiving then, he would not be now. He raised his wand even as she stood above her murdered husband, her face twisted with shock...*

Harry jolted upright in bed, finding it difficult to move as he tried to disentangle himself from his sheets. He was drenched from head to toe in sweat, and his heart hammered in his chest as if it sought to punch through his rib cage. He fell back to the pillows, drained. He felt nauseous, and he stumbled out of bed, dragging his sheets with him at first, making for the toilet. He reached it just in time, vomiting his sick into the porcelain bowl.

He vomited again, and as he knelt there, he felt a presence behind him. It wasn't Blaise, as he'd feared. It was Dobby.

"Harry Potter had a nightmare, Dobby knows," the elf said, biting his lip anxiously in a way that reminded him so much of Hermione. "Mistress Daphne Dressler also gave Dobby a letter for Harry Potter, but Dobby will keep it if that is what Harry Potter sir wants."

Harry flushed the toilet, wiped at his mouth disgustedly, and turned back to his unseen shadow. Dobby could only have been here for one reason: he'd been either watching or monitoring Harry on Daphne's orders. He shook his head, he *needed* advice from Daphne right now, especially after a nightmare like *that*. His mind was still scrambled as he tried to analyze every moment of the dream, which, unlike most, seemed to be seared into his memory, not fading quickly. Obviously, *something* was trying to tell him something. Whether it was his conscience, his magic, or even *Luna*, one didn't try to pass off what he'd just experienced as a common nightmare. No, this was a *warning*.

And, perhaps, what frightened him the most was that it *made sense*. That he might very well be on the path that led to what his nightmare had shown him. That he might allow his hatred, ambition and desire for power and glory overcome him. That he might *fall*.

"Is Harry Potter alright?" Dobby asked quietly, breaking into his thoughts. Harry now noticed the envelope that he was carrying. Daphne's reply.

"Not...not really, Dobby," Harry admitted. "But I want to see that letter."

Dobby nodded, offering it to him. Harry took it. "Thanks."

Dobby's eyes were leaking with tears, but he nodded and vanished with a pop. Harry thanked the heavens that the elf had figured out that he needed to be calm in order to help.

He walked on shaking legs up to the Common Room. The stones felt frozen beneath his bare feet. The space was empty, though the fire still burned brightly. He collapsed on one of the emerald green couches, ripping open the envelope. With shaking hands, he unfolded the letter and read.

*Dearest Harry,*

*I'm afraid I felt it was only a matter of time before this problem arose. You are committed to your friends, and they are committed to you, but that comes with a price, as all things do.*

*I'm not going to pretend I don't believe you erred greatly in disclosing Hermione's secret to a person she obviously distrusts. Nor will I pretend that I am comfortable with the amount of trust you have in a boy who has openly admitted he first approached with ulterior motives than just open friendship. The Zabinis may be non-aligned, but that doesn't mean that you should welcome them with open arms. You are playing a dangerous game, and to be perfectly honest, you are playing it poorly.*

*And a great deal of that is my fault. I allowed my hopes and dreams to run away with me, to cloud my judgment. I overlooked your inexperience and youth in such matters and felt compelled to help you achieve your goals as quickly as possible. In so doing, I guaranteed your failure. You are wise beyond your years, Harry, but you are still as young as your age. You fail to understand, just as I did, the consequences of your actions in terms of personal relationships, anything beyond the broadest scope of future events. There is no war right now, Harry, and you are no leader. The tools are there, the drive is there. The experience is not.*

*And so I, as your guardian and friend, am going to ask you to suspend your quest for new allies. It is not because I believe that you are ultimately incapable, or that I underestimate your maturity and ability. It is because it is not a good course of action. If there is any universal law in the Wizarding world, Harry, it is that wizards are drawn to power. When that power is wielded, it is a forgone conclusion that they will, in their hearts or otherwise, throw themselves in with one camp or the other. The purebloods are even more prone to this behavior, because allying with those possessing great power is a much a tradition as it is logical. When you are ready, they will come to you. Some may begin to notice sooner than others. Get to know your classmates, but treat them not as an opportunity to gain favor with their parents and family, but to determine who you can trust. Enter into friendships because you like the person and derive*

*pleasure from being around them. It is not your place to extend yourself beyond that.*

*Dumbledore's ideas come as no surprise to me. I have suspected that your magic is tainted since I saw it for the first time. I need not tell you this is by no fault of your own. Nor will I blame myself, because it was both an intended consequence and perhaps even destiny. There is no doubt you will need that power in the future.*

*But that last word is the key, Harry. The future. The future is when you will become a leader. I want you to enjoy your childhood, Harry. You will never have another chance. Voldemort has not returned, nor are there any signs that he will in the immediate future. Black is a rogue agent, an informant who has lost his sanity. He will be dealt with, this I assure you.*

*As for your friends, it would seem as though you have no choice but to tell them what they want to know. And because of that, I give you my blessing to reveal to them whatever you feel is necessary or appropriate. But, by friends, I mean Hermione and Ginny. I do not mean Arabella Zabini's son. In fact, I expressly forbid you from telling him about your power. I don't expect you to break off your relationship with him, but I ask that you reassess it. If all it is good for is placing you in good standing with other students, is it really a friendship? Is he really a person to tell your deepest secrets to? Answer that question, and make your own choice. Consider his allegiances to his family most of all. His mother, for one, would not take kindly to her son withholding information. That is all the advice I can give you. The rest is up to you.*

*Remus and I had a discussion in the time that you were asleep following Black's attack. It did not go well. I am pleased to hear that he seems to now understand what is at stake. Though I fear he may have second thoughts once he has time to think it over.*

*I hope that I have been helpful. I am sorry for leading you down the wrong path, and for all the pain that I have caused you. I love you, Harry, and nothing will ever change that. And I assure you, Lily would be proud of what you have become. That doesn't mean you are*

*without flaws, though for a mother, that can be difficult to see at times. But you are a great wizard, and a credit to your parents. Both of them.*

Stay safe,

Daphne

---

He found Luna exactly where she had been in his dream, something that made him a bit uneasy as he approached. Still, his face was set and determined. He had a hunch he needed to investigate. He stopped in front of the chair in which she sat, cross-legged, reading the *Quibbler* upside-down. "Luna?"

The girl looked up at him, dull blue eyes blinking. "Yes?"

He took a deep breath. "What do you know about the dream I had last night?"

Rather than denying any knowledge or asking what he was talking about, she paused. That told Harry all he needed to know. She smiled. "So it worked," she said finally.

Harry glared at her. "It worked? You mean you *planned* that?"

"I sowed the seeds of doubt," she explained. "Your imagination did the rest."

Harry blinked in confusion. "But your powers? Are you an Illusionist?"

Luna smiled. "Perhaps I could be described that way, but that's not really accurate," she said. "I'm more like a human Heliopath. I can go into a mind and show people what I want them to see. But so far, no more than one at a time. And you are the only one I've been able to trick without being present."

Harry glared at her again. He didn't like being deceived and manipulated. "I'm honored."

Luna shook her head, ignoring his glare. "You shouldn't be. Only Uglas are honored to be in the presence of wizards and witches. They worship them, you know. Wizards provide sunlight for them."

Harry nodded impatiently. "So, that...*dream*...you were trying to tell me something?"

Luna gave him a non-committal shrug. "Not me personally. I thought you were being rather foolish, but that was your own conscience. It's always there, you know. It seems like that dream bothered you a great deal."

Harry nodded grimly. "You...well, Dream-Luna showed me what I might become. She showed me a scene of me finally breaking, succumbing to the Darkness, and murdering my friends for crimes real and imagined."

Luna frowned. "She wasn't very nice, was she? I hope that's not what you really think of me."

"It isn't," Harry assured her. He took a seat in the same seat he'd occupied in his dream. "But I suppose that I have to make a choice now."

"You may not be as grown up as you think," Luna said, still reading the Rune puzzle, "but you have to learn to make decisions on your own. Tell Hermione and Ginny if you want to. If you don't, don't. After all, you still have me and Blaise to speak with. And I think Daphne Greengrass likes you."

That stopped Harry's mind dead. "*What?*"

"She's interested in you. I can tell by the way she looks at you. You are a puzzle to her, a puzzle she's determined to find the missing pieces to." She scowled. "She doesn't like you like *that*. She has eyes only for Theodore. He doesn't like *her* much, though. Thinks she's too apathetic. He's too stupid to realize that that is a mask."

Harry nodded slowly, seeing no point in disagreeing. The fact that Luna had noticed the looks Greengrass was giving him, looks that Harry had apparently missed, was significant.

He made up his mind. "I'm going to tell them," he decided. "I can't do this without them. They are my friends, and they deserve to...share the danger, I suppose."

"That's a good attitude," Luna said brightly, but with an undertone of withering sarcasm. Harry started to wonder if she had used sarcasm before, and he simply hadn't noticed. Now that he knew what to look for, he was picking it up. "Focus on the danger, not to yourself, but to them. You can't protect them forever."

"I know that," he growled. "They will need to stand with me."

"Will you stop thinking about the war for a second?" Luna asked. "Daphne is very *stupid*, you know. Not only did she think you could handle the knowledge that you'd be heavily influential in the final fall of a man with the blood of thousands on his hands, wizards and magical creature, but she also completely forgot how *she* reacted when placed under *less* strenuous circumstances."

Luna paused, gathering her thoughts. "Daphne blames what she has become on three events. First, the murder of her family. Second, when she hunted down the Death Eaters responsible. And third, the murder of her husband. She's completely overlooked a fourth event, an event that happened before she was old enough to talk: being designated a Magical Heiress. She was slipping even before the Death Eaters came for her family."

Harry stared at her. "How do you know this?"

"Because even as good an Occlumens as she is, anyone that can sense in the same way that I can, her emotions cloud the air around her. She is quite literally followed by a shadow of her past." She grimaced. "Being around her is quite depressing, really. She's always moping, fatalistic. She knows she will die soon, and she's resigned to that. How stupid."

Harry tried to ignore the last thing Luna said, though it was difficult. He'd suspected much the same thing for quite some time: that Daphne knew her time in this realm was coming to a short, violent end, and that in some perverted way, she *welcomed* it with open

arms. A chance to end the pain, the suffering. Suddenly, Harry wasn't sure if he could blame her.

"But she's *irrelevant*," Luna insisted. "You've made up your mind, have you? Then go find Hermione and Ginevra and tell them what they want to know. And think hard on Blaise. Daphne isn't wrong about *that*."

Harry nodded stiffly. "Thank you."

Luna shrugged. "It's hard to watch you stride blindly down the path to self-destruction. With great power comes great responsibility. I've learned that, and you need to learn it now. Or all will be lost."

And with that, she got up and *skipped* away.

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He found Hermione and Ginny sitting at the Ravenclaw Table, speaking with their friends. His stomach roiling with anxiousness, he was in no condition to eat. He waited just outside the doors to the Great Hall. He smiled as Luna Lovegood pointed out his presence to his friends. A few minutes later, they stood before him. Ginny wore an expectant look on her face, though she looked a bit remorseful. Hermione stared straight at him, and he swallowed. "Let's go," he said, indicating upstairs and the Room of Requirement. "We need to talk."

He headed for the staircases, and they followed.

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A/N: Interesting chapter. Quite strange, but I suppose that's given when Luna is involved. A very necessary chapter. A number of you correctly pointed out that Hermione wouldn't take kindly to Harry disclosing her secret to Blaise, and I'd been planning a wakeup call for Harry for while. The other reason is that I didn't like the way his pureblood/allying gathering was going. So, let them come to him. I'm sure he'll put on a display next year (though I do intend to keep all three tasks, rest assured all four champions are going to find the going a bit tougher.)

The dream is just that, a dream, and starts after the break leading from Harry's argument with Hermione. They are chronologically sequential; there is a gap of several days. Luna, as she put it "planted the seeds of doubt" and Harry's rather vivid imagination did the rest. It wasn't actually supposed to be a dream at first, but the farther I got, and the more OOC Luna became, I thought it might be a good idea.

Yes, Dobby will continue to make appearances. He's going to have a big moment in the upcoming war.

So, Harry is finally going to tell them about his power. And what he knows about his destiny. His relationship with Blaise has been completely thrown off, and he'll have to address that. Note that Harry deliberately avoided Blaise when Hermione and Ginny refused to speak to him; it wasn't that he didn't care.

Luna's powers are interesting, and you got a partial explanation in this chapter. Harry analyzes even when he's sleeping. Yes, I know I'm departing dramatically from canon. But I can do that. Luna is extremely powerful more in that she has an extremely rare ability than she possesses power on the scale of Harry. I attributed Luna's belief in all those non-existent magical creatures to the fact that her father believes in them, and he is the only one that knows and accepts who she is. I couldn't resist putting in the "with great power comes great responsibility" line, as cheesy as it sounds.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

## Chapter 15: The Approaching Storm

Shutting the door of the Room of Requirement, Harry looked at his two best friends with trepidation. Ginny looked surprisingly regretful, perhaps rethinking her decisions to side with Hermione's rash course of action. Though, personally, Harry felt that she needed to do something. He wouldn't have been forced to think twice about the entire situation otherwise.

They had about thirty minutes before they needed to be off to class. Harry hoped they wouldn't need all of it. He wasn't sure how long it would take to explain about the changes he had undergone since the duel in the Chamber, but he wanted to get it done as soon as possible. Vivid images of his nightmare were flashing through his head; watching his fall from an eerie third-period view while still thinking the nightmare-Harry's thoughts as if they were his own. He shuddered, and noticed that Ginny gave him a strange look. Hermione was still pacing.

She stopped when Ginny spoke. "What is it that you want to tell us, Harry?" she prompted. Her voice was not accusing, threatening or even demanding, but it was clear she wasn't going to let him leave the room without first knowing what he'd been hiding from them.

He took a deep breath, turning to face both of them. "You both know what happened in the Chamber," he began. They nodded. "Well, something else happened at the very end of Riddle's duel with Daphne." He paused, searching for a way to describe the event. It was difficult, and he had to rely on Daphne's account, since he had been dazed from the torture he had suffered and the pain his body had been experiencing. "Well, when she used the Spirit Banishing Spell on my...body, something else happened."

"Let's make sure we have this straight," Hermione suggested, sounding as if she simply wanted clarification. "The Spirit Banishing Spell ejected Riddle from you, did it not?"

Harry nodded, trying not to let his mind drift back to the still hazy memories. It was a lost cause. "Well, it's more accurate to say it *tore* Riddle out of me. In the process, because Riddle had established links deep into both my mind and my magical core, disrupting all of

that, it badly damaged my mind.” He laughed slightly, which earned him a concerned look from Ginny and an irritated noise from Hermione. He felt his face burning, and he struggled to regain his composure. His throat was suddenly dry, and he swallowed thickly.

Ginny gave him a worried look, and even Hermione’s icy expression thawed slightly. *I’m not going to use my bad memories as a reason not to tell them what they need to know. If I don’t tell them now, I never will. Worse, I might lie to them, and only tell them part of the truth...I can’t do that.*

He coughed slightly, and took another deep breath. “...anyway,” he began, more softly this time, “Riddle apparently reappeared in spirit-form over the two of us,” he said, indicating himself and Ginny. The young redhead didn’t flinch. “Daphne was exhausted, dazed. Riddle actually beat her, but as you know, Ginny here saved her life.” This time Ginny did react, turning bright red and looking at the floor. Hermione sat next to her and patted her on the shoulder.

“That’s when Dumbledore got there,” Harry continued. “Both he and Daphne had come to the same conclusion: Riddle was linked to the Diary. If it were to be destroyed, Riddle would cease to exist.”

“How’d he destroy it?” Hermione asked, never one to let an opportunity to learn about powerful magic slip by.

“By using the same sword that ended Salazar Slytherin’s life,” Harry replied. “He’s a descendent of Gryffindor...extremely distant, mind you, but he and his brother are the only known descendants of any of the founders. Well, *most* people don’t know that Tom Marvolo Riddle...Voldemort, is Slytherin’s descendent.”

Ginny frowned. “Professor Dumbledore has a brother?”

Harry nodded. “His name’s Aberforth. He’s actually the bartender down at the Hog’s Head. He isn’t nearly as magically accomplished as his older brother, of course. Or, at least, he hasn’t used that power in the same way.” He smiled. “Daphne seems to like him.”

He cleared his throat, determined to finish this story. “So, anyway, he stabbed the sword through the diary. The weapon is imbued with the

magic of its creator, and was thus able to not just physically destroy the Diary, but also to annihilate the...*creature* that was bound to it.”

Hermione looked like she was getting impatient, something that struck Harry as quite odd. “This is all very interesting, but it doesn’t sound like you’ve told us anything groundbreaking.”

“I’m sure he’s getting there,” Ginny growled at her. “Aren’t you?” she asked firmly, staring at him. He nodded.

“I am,” he said. Another deep breath and he began speaking. “When the Diary was destroyed, the magic that Riddle wielded wasn’t. Magic is like matter; it cannot be destroyed or created. It merely exists. As such, when the item that the magic was bound to was obliterated, it sought a place to go—”

“You,” Hermione said softly, “It used the connections that Riddle had forged with your magical core to channel all of that power into you.” She looked at him expectantly.

Slowly, he nodded. “It did.” He sighed deeply. This next part was the hardest to admit, but he pushed back his fears and continued. “It’s ironic, really,” he said, not sounding in the least bit amused. “The magic that I...*absorbed* from Riddle is probably what saved my sanity. My body and mind were broken, and should have been beyond repair. But my new power protected me, *nourished* me and aided my body in repairing most of the damage. When I was healthy enough to be conscious, I woke up. Had I woken sooner, the damage would have probably been permanent.”

He chanced a glance at his friends. Ginny was hunched over, small hands on her lap. Her freckled alabaster complexion was much paler than usual, and Harry thought he saw tears shining in her eyes. Hermione was completely silent, her mind trying to process everything she had heard. Harry also noted, with some misery, that her hands were clenched into tight fists, her knuckles white from a lack of blood flow.

“I didn’t realize what had happened, at first; no one did. Madam Pomfrey detected unusual amounts of stray magic, but I suppose she attested it to the injuries to my core. We didn’t realize what had

happened until the first time I actually tried to perform magic." He laughed slightly, sounding more pathetic than cheerful. "And, of course, being me, the first real test of my magic, outside of a couple of Lighting Charms, was a duel with Tonks."

Hermione gasped, and her eyes narrowed. "Has Daphne lost her mind? You could have been *killed!* Tonks could have been killed."

Harry swallowed hard. Ginny didn't miss it. "And that's what happened, wasn't it. You must have overcharged your spells without meaning to, and injured both yourself and Tonks in the process."

Harry nodded. "I was more shaken up than anything else, but she had to go to St. Mungo's for a cracked skull. I hit her with...well, what *should* have been a Striking Curse."

Both girls nodded. "What happened next?" Hermione asked.

Harry sighed. He was conflicted over how much he should tell them. He settled on telling them everything, no matter how embarrassing or frightening. It didn't really make a difference, anyway. His friends weren't going to abandon him for anything he'd done, and they'd find out somehow sooner or later and question if he really trusted them. He did, and they needed to know that. "Well, there was only one option, really. Bind my magic."

Hermione frowned. "How could you do that? Did Dumbledore created some kind of small Wards?"

Harry shook his head. "Daphne managed to create barriers to keep most of my newly acquired magic in. I say *most* because I insisted that I gain at least some immediate benefits." He took in another deep breath. "But I'd be lying to you if I said that was all. When Daphne first came to me about binding my magic, I reacted...*violently*."

He paced in a circle, and then sighed. "I don't know what made me do it, but I suppose I was just frightened by the prospect of being controlled again. I suppose it didn't help that I was still hateful and distrustful of Daphne for what she did to me in the Chamber."

Hermione and Ginny nodded in unison. He felt greatly relieved. Hermione opened her mouth to ask a question, probably related to how this led to Harry attempting to court allies at the age of thirteen, but he waved her off. "Please," he said, trying not to sound like he was begging. She relented. He checked his watch. He had fifteen minutes. "It hasn't worked like she hoped it would. Twice, my magic has broken free of its bounds. The first was the time that I was attacked by the Hippogriff. The second was when I summoned my first corporeal Patronus." He shrugged. "I actually used the feeling that I felt when that magic was coursing through me as the memory for that Patronus. I've never felt anything like it."

Hermione looked like she did in her first year at Hogwarts when in Potions. The only thing that was missing was the wildly waving hand held so high over her head that Harry feared she might dislocate her shoulder. "There's more," he told her, and she relented again. "Because of where I acquired the magic, it's much more dangerous to both myself and others than if I had developed it naturally. It's fully mature, while my natural magic isn't. Worse, it also carries with it the...stain of its former master." He paused, ignoring the flabbergasted look on Hermione's face. "The form my Patronus took more or less confirmed what we've all feared; that is, Daphne, Dumbledore and I. It was an Adder, a magical, highly venomous snake that will be forever known as the species of all of Lord Voldemort's familiars."

Now he was *very* conflicted. Did he want to tell his friends about what he knew of the Prophecy? Their answer was unclear. He knew it would benefit him to have others to consult, along with Luna, who seemed to either know what he knew or simply sense the destiny that lay before him. *Let's see what they have to say about what I've already told them.*

Ginny blinked. "That's all?" she asked, sounding a bit disappointed.

Harry glared at her. "You were expecting more?" he shot back. She flinched, and he felt a twinge of regret.

But Hermione was also looking at him with her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Yes, we were," she said. "We were expecting a reason

why you've decided to skip the rest of your childhood and rub shoulders with the pureblood hierarchy at the age of thirteen."

Harry sighed. *So much for keeping it a secret.* "Alright, there is a reason for that...but this is even more sensitive than the other information. And this should answer your question. I've also got something to say on that note, something that will probably reassure you a bit."

Hermione nodded. She wasn't budging an inch. "Go on."

"First, I found out something while I was recovering...something that shouldn't have surprised me...really, it didn't. It was more surprise that Daphne had *hidden* it from me than shock from the secret itself."

He paused for a long moment. He knew that Daphne had given him her blessing to tell them whatever he wanted. But at the same time, he wasn't sure he could do this.

For the first time, Hermione's faced softened completely. "If you really don't want to tell us now, that's alright. We've got enough to think about already. We'll give you time if you need it." She managed not to add that class started in ten minutes.

Harry shook his head emphatically. "This is complicated," he admitted. "I'm not sure I even understand all of it."

"Just tell us what you can," Ginny put in quickly, probably sounding a bit more excited then she meant to.

He sighed. "Basically, I overhead..." he paused again, debating on how to explain the Prophecy and its connotations. He thought it best that he started from the *very* beginning. "Fourteen years ago, at the height of the First War, a Prophecy was made. A Prophecy that would have a tremendous impact on the lives of a number of individuals...and the Wizarding world as a whole."

Hermione gave him a look that seemed to say, 'Keep going.'

"The contents of that Prophecy were overheard by an agent of Voldemort," he continued, noting with a small amount of satisfaction

that neither one of them reacted to the name. "And from that information, he made the decision to hunt down a child. A child that had actually not yet been born at the time the Prophecy was made."

He looked at both of them. Hermione was frowning, as if trying to understand how what he was telling them related to the situation. Ginny simply looked back at him, urging him to continue. "That child was me," he said. Hermione sucked in a breath and nodded in sudden understanding. Ginny looked confused, but didn't say anything.

"So that was the reason that V-v-Voldemort went after your parents?" Hermione asked. "Because of this Prophecy. What did it say?"

Harry shrugged. "After Daphne told me the Prophecy, she consulted Dumbledore, and the three of us agreed that she should wall off the memory until I was both capable of handling the responsibility and protecting it myself. I don't remember the exact text. What I do know is that it involves me and Voldemort, that it is the reason he tried to kill me, and that it is extremely important that it remain secret. Of course, I've drawn my own assumptions from that. I don't know if I am the key to defeating him once and for all, or if I simply play a major role. But the connotations are obvious."

"So let me get this straight," Ginny began, sounding a bit peeved. "You decided to befriend and take Blaise into your trust, began acting about twice your age, and made me and Hermione wonder if you were losing it because of a Prophecy made fourteen years ago that you don't even *know the contents of?* That's *it?*"

Harry nodded. "You'll probably be pleased to hear that Daphne and I have decided to let things happen as they will and to simply leave the ally-gathering for later."

"And Blaise?" Hermione asked, sounding quite irritated. "What about him?"

Harry took a deep breath, meeting her gaze. He saw a great deal of concern, confusion, and anxiousness in her brown eyes. "I still consider him a friend, though I am going to have to rethink how much

I trust him. He's assured me that he'll keep what I told him secret, but I'm going to be his friend because I like him as a person, not because he has connections. That was stupid and misguided to begin with."

"*Took you long enough,*" Hermione growled under her breath.

"I'm sorry for hiding this from you. But I hope you know understand what's at stake. Both of you could be killed because of what you know."

"We don't care," Ginny said firmly. She got up, ran over to him, and hugged him firmly around the waist. He returned the embrace with fervor. Hermione approached and wrapped her arms around both of them. Still, it wasn't surprising when she abruptly let go and gasped in alarm.

"We were supposed to be in class *five minutes ago!*"

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### Sunrise.

Peter Pettigrew sat on the stone ledge, invisible all but the most discerning eye, his magical signature and presence hidden from even the razor-sharp sense of Albus Dumbledore, his former Headmaster.

He was in the Owlery, where he often spent his early mornings. He hoped he wouldn't be interrupted this time by some student desperate to mail something home. When that happened, he was immediately forced to transform back into a rat, and retreat to the safety of his cage on the nightstand beside Ron Weasley's bed. Of course, he'd also have to be careful to avoid that blasted Kneazle mix, Crookshanks he thought Ron had called him, that seemed to be able to sense that he was no ordinary rat.

And then there was the matter of Sirius. Sirius, who was probably hiding in several different locations in the Forbidden Forest, using the centaur leader's life debt to him to his greatest advantage, was less of a threat. He was fuzzy on the details, but it sounded like Sirius had attempted to abduct Harry using the tunnel that went from a cave near the edge of the lake into the lower dungeons. He'd been stopped by Snape. Peter had chuckle (or rather, since he was a rat,

*squeaked*) at the mention of that. As he expected, rather than giving him away, it simply made Ron praise him as a “bloody brilliant animal.” Peter didn’t particularly care for being called an animal, but he took compliments where he could find them.

There was a small burst of blinding light as the sun peaked over the distant hills and began its slow, steady trek across the sky. Peter felt the urge to clap his hands with glee. He *loved* the sunrise. Perhaps it was because it reminded him of his father. Henry Pettigrew, a hard-working, stubborn Muggle, always got up at sunrise to feed the chickens and tend to the garden and small farm that supplied the Pettigrews with both food and income. His son would often be awoken by the sound of the creaking old gate that Henry never saw fit to either ask his wife to cast a Lubrication Charm upon or simply grease the hinges himself. Perhaps he felt it would be a break in his normal routine.

His mother had loved his father dearly, enough that she had distanced herself from the rest of her family when she fell in love with a Muggle. The Gatlands had been, in Peter’s opinion, a family obsessed with heritage for no reason. They had countless Squibs in the family, many had married Muggleborns or Halfbloods, and they had no fortune or inheritance to speak of. But Patricia Gatland had dared to cross the line, no matter how meaningless it was. However, her family had faded away, becoming entirely irrelevant, never gaining the slightest sliver of the respectability they felt they were entitled to.

It had all changed when his father had died. It had been a senseless death, a *Muggle* death. A simple car accident had claimed Henry Pettigrew’s life. He had not been drinking. He had not been speeding. The other driver, who survived, had been driving a bit too fast, but it had been a mere quirk of cruel fate that had put Peter’s father in the wrong place at the wrong time.

They had not had insurance of any kind, and they had just been getting along, requiring financial aid from Hogwarts to help fund Peter’s education, at the time of the tragedy. They had not had the money to pay for a Muggle or Wizarding funeral, and Henry’s parents had long since died. Henry had been buried in one of the field, a

nondescript marker indicating his final resting place. They had been forced to abandon the farm, forced to rely on only his mother's mediocre magical ability and her work at a Muggle tailor shop in the nearby town.

This event had been a turning point in Peter's life. For desperate, lonely, seeking comfort from those he considered his friends, he had gone to them. They had ignored him.

Well, perhaps that wasn't exactly the way to put it. Sirius had ignored him, offering a few unhelpful and dishonest condolences. James had seemed exceedingly uncomfortable, and taken to avoiding him as he moped. Remus...well, Remus had been the only one to say a consoling words to him. Still, he had remained distant. It had been at that time that Peter had begun to realize that none of them truly were his friends – that they saw him as a tag-along, a nuisance. Oh, he continued to play the role perfectly, but inside he fumed. He graduated and joined the Order of the Phoenix. Still, he remained in the shadows, taken for granted.

Then, about a year and a half before the war came to a stunning end, he had been approached by an agent of the Dark Lord. An agent that offered riches and power beyond his wildest dreams, an opportunity to strike back at his turncoat friends, true acceptance into an order of strength...if he would agree to spy on the Order of the Phoenix, and receive the Dark Mark.

Peter hadn't even hesitated. And for the next year or so, he had been the perfect spy, gathering information and secrets and giving them to the Death Eaters, allowing them to spring ambushes, break through wards, attack when the Order was elsewhere occupied. He was trained in the Dark Arts, tutored mostly by Amycus and Alecto Carrow. He had become truly powerful, ready to serve his master in battle. But such was not his task. The Dark Lord had held him back, just as the Order had, but the difference was that the Dark Lord assured him that he would play a crucial role in the months to come. He had been content with that.

And then, after James and Lily Potter had gone into hiding, Peter had waited, biding his time. He knew that Sirius would fear that he was an

obvious target; it wasn't as though he wasn't. And so, when Sirius had brought the issue up, he had been there, ready to take on the mantle. The only obstacle, Daphne Dressler, had removed herself from the picture by her heinous actions the night of her husband's death.

Peter had waited again. And then, on Halloween Night, a traditional holiday of Darkness, the time when the wild and primal magic wielded by the Dark families was at its greatest strength, the Dark Lord himself had arrived. His destiny had accompanied him.

But it had all gone wrong. His Master had failed in his task, defeated by the very infant he sought to eliminate. He, Lucius, and Bellatrix had fled from the burning cottage, knowing deep within their hearts that it was over; that they had been defeated.

And so Pettigrew, knowing that his treachery would be blatantly obvious to Sirius or Daphne, had tried to flee.

And now, twelve years later, he sat on the cold, stone ledge of the Owlery Window, watching the sun rise. It had cleared the hills now, and the sky was bathed in fiery orange light.

Pettigrew sighed. He had grown tired of hiding, desired to return to some level of respectability. But that was the trouble with being *dead*.

Besides, he knew that he had a duty here. Somehow, he knew that his master would rise again, and soon. He knew that he had no choice but to aid him in any way possible. But he could not do it alone. He needed to find others, to rally them to a cause thought dead by so many. But he could not for the life of him figure out a way to accomplish this. None of his comrades who had slipped seamlessly back into their lives of wealth and respectability would be willing, though they would no doubt flock the risen Dark Lord when he returned, begging forgiveness.

He needed help; not merely to help restore his Lord, but to discover a way to mollify him. Though he might be blameless for the events at Godric's Hollow, the Dark Lord would not be so forgiving, even of imagined sins. He needed a gift, a treasure of great worth to present to his Lord as an apology.

*Potter.*

Of course, Peter realized. Should he successfully abduct and hide the boy, perhaps blaming the entire thing on Black in the process, Voldemort would accept him back with open arms, so much as such a thing was possible. But, again, he needed help. He was not in a position to take the boy, and he had no safe place to hide or to restrain him. The boy was powerful for his age, and his power could only grow.

He needed allies. *What I need, Peter thought, is Amycus and Alecto. But where to find them? And how to contact them? Or to make them believe that it's actually me. And how to decide when they should come.*

These were questions that Peter knew he needed to answer. But for the first time in years, he felt a glimmer of hope. He had a plan.

And for the first time in his life, somehow he knew he was guaranteed of success. The Dark Lord would rise again.

And Peter Pettigrew would at last have revenge over those that had betrayed him.

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Hermione Granger felt absolutely terrible. It was probably the worst that she had felt since her first year, when the Gryffindors in her year had abandoned her for having the gall to associate with Harry.

She couldn't believe how cruel she had been. Not only that, she still couldn't believe she'd managed to convince herself that what she was doing was necessary. She had been angry with Harry for what she had interpreted as a betrayal of trust. But that was her selfishness talking. Harry had been thinking nothing of the sort. Rather, he'd been trying to help her, seeking advice from a boy that might know a great deal more about magic than they did.

She just didn't like Blaise Zabini. He struck her as overly-cunning, manipulative... *oily*. He had somehow gotten into Harry's good graces, and that shocked her considering how distrustful she'd expected him to be following his ordeal with Riddle. All this talk of

'pureblooded allies' and 'leaderships roles' had baffled her, and the fervor with which Harry pursued these aims was stranger still.

But she had stuck with it, keeping her doubts to herself, trying to allow Harry the benefit of the doubt. She was confident she knew more about Harry than he himself knew. Both of them had seen each other at their best and at their worst, had been tested to their limits, and had faced certain death. They had been far closer than best friends, and had an implicit trust in each other, knowledge that one would always protect the other, be it from enemies or from themselves. And, *Merlin knew*, Harry and Hermione both occasionally needed such protection. Hermione's overzealous nature, her unquenchable curiosity and desire to learn, her compassionate nature: Her unshakable belief in fairness and equality for all, and her inherent trust in authority tended to get the better of her at times.

As for Harry, he struggled with overconfidence, misplaced delusions of grandeur, and a belief in his own maturity. The latter was especially problematic. It wasn't merely that Harry thought like an adult, it was that he *thought* he thought like an adult. The truth was that he thought like *Daphne*. The difference between the rational thought processes and beliefs of a typical adult wizard and those of the misguided and fanatical Grey Maiden were *tremendous*. Like Harry, Hermione believed, Daphne looked at the world in a way she thought was completely rational and well-reasoned, when in reality it was none of those things.

And Harry wasn't much better. Her worries and concerns had continued to mount with each time Harry had come close to death and plowed on as if nothing had happened, driving towards some grandiose plan that Hermione and Ginny secretly agreed was absolutely *ludicrous*. The idea that a thirteen-year old wizard, no matter how famous, could have not only the *desire and willingness*, but the *ability* to rub shoulders with some of the most powerful and dangerous magical persons in the wizarding world was insane and unsupportable.

*Really, Hermione thought, there are two people to blame for this mess Harry got himself into: Daphne...and Blaise.*

She honestly believed that if Zabini hadn't rendezvoused with Harry during the summer, then butted his head into their train car on the Hogwarts Express, that they would all be the better for it. Harry had been given false hope, something Hermione thought showed that even Blaise, (who pretended to be humble and unassuming even though he radiated arrogance in his speech and posture,) could be as naïve and misguided as Harry had been. Just because he grew up a pureblood didn't make him an expert.

Her quill broke with a snap and ink peppered the page of the essay she had been writing for Herbology. She groaned softly, trying not to draw attention to herself, and then carefully cast a Cleaning Charm, trying to focus as hard as she could on the unwanted ink blots, lest she lose thirty minutes of hard work. She managed it, though she had to retrace a few letters here and there. She cast the same charm on her hands, set the broken quill aside, and pulled out a new one. She stared out the window at the gloomy skies as she dipped the tip of the quill in ink and began thinking about what she was going to write.

Though she could not see them, she knew that Harry and Ginny were both attending Quidditch practice in the miserable November weather. It seemed to Hermione that the weather became even worse on days that they spent out on the Pitch, honing their skills like the rest of the Slytherin team.

Normally, she would be there, cheering her friends on, but for some reason, today she didn't feel like it. It wasn't as though she needed to finish this essay now; it was due in three days, and incorporated material they hadn't even covered yet. Still, for the first time she could remember, she found herself envious of flying...and of Ginny.

It was...*strange*, and even somewhat troubling that she was jealous of the attention Harry gave her. She wasn't sure, but she guessed that Harry was starting to have...feelings for the redhead, if his unusual awkwardness around her was any indication. He also seemed to look to her more for approval, although Hermione wasn't sure if she was making that up or if it was actually true. She found it difficult to think rationally when emotions clouded her mind.

She had an idea of where the jealousy came from. Her idea had mostly come out of the realization that she'd never felt jealous when Harry was interacting with Tonks, yet she did when he spent time with Ginny. Mostly, these occasions came when he flew with her or occasionally gave her some tutoring on Spellwork, on the rare occasions that she requested it. She'd tried to be more independent, do more of her own work, and Hermione could only applaud that.

No, perhaps it was from her unreasonable and childish ideas that the two were inseparable. She was especially troubled when she somehow felt superior to Ginny because the younger girl hadn't been there when Harry and Hermione were going through the hardships they endured during their First Year, hadn't charged with Harry across a field of deadly plants, fought a life or death battle with life-sized chess pieces, run from their lives from malevolent flying keys, faced down the Dark Lord himself in the chamber where the stone was kept. Hermione often felt the urge to laugh at herself. To be perfectly honest, as much credit as Harry gave her, *she* had been the one that had to be rescued from death by Harry's decapitation of the black king. *She* had been paralyzed with fear on several occasions, not the least of which was when Harry had screamed at her to run for help as he dodged the blows from the troll, and she had just stood there, motionless, watching as the creature nearly extinguished his young life. *Merlin, I poisoned him!* she told herself, laughing in a self-deprecating fashion at her justifications for disliking Ginny Weasley.

And it wasn't as if Ginny *couldn't* have taken her place in all of those events. She was a Slytherin, albeit in a different way than Harry was, but she wasn't a coward. Hermione knew she still had quite a ways to go before her personality became what it would be. Only of Harry could she say that one of them had matured far beyond a boy or girl of that age.

Of course, that didn't mean he was criminally, painfully *stupid* at times.

She shook her head, double-checking her information on the Wailing Willowgrass. It was, as always, almost a word-by-word translation of the textbook. *Ginny can't do that*, she whined mentally in an intentionally petulant tone. She almost giggled at how stupid she

sounded. *The thought of me being as stuck-up and arrogant as Pansy Parkinson is just frightening.*

Then, of course, there was the matter of what her disturbingly heartless actions had prompted Harry to reveal. And while some of it came as no surprise, most was absolutely shocking.

The idea that Harry possessed as much raw power as Professor Dumbledore, a comparison that even though Harry had never made directly, still sounded quite reasonable, was absolutely incredible. She knew her friend was special, had known from the moment he'd met her in that rickety boat of the shores of the Hogwarts Lake, but this was something else entirely. She wasn't as well versed in magical history as Harry was, but she knew enough. She knew enough to realize that a recurring theme was that all wizards, pureblood or not, were drawn towards powerful magic. That it was untrue to say that *most* wizards and witches possessing that much power had become leaders of thousands, on occasion, *millions*, before the Great Divide of 1947, when most of the countries possessing large wizarding populations had adopted a posture of isolationism, rarely cooperating or interacting within each other. Hermione found it quite ironic that the fracturing of relations had come in the same year that the United Nations had been formed.

Rather, it was accurate to say that *all* witches and wizards of tremendous power had become leaders with statures that matched their abilities. *Voldemort, Dumbledore...and Harry...*

She had never seen Daphne Dressler in combat before, though a small part her greatly desired to observe the abilities, instincts, and knowledge that had earned Daphne a reputation as one of the most fearsome and *feared* duelists in a century. But now she knew that if Harry was able to harness his power, he could swat his guardian aside like an annoying insect. It was almost *wrong* for a boy his age; and that's what he still was, a *boy*. Of course, as Harry admitted, he couldn't access most of his power, much less *control* it. But Hermione had seen enough to know that Daphne's wishful thinking, that she could control his power until he mastered how to use it, was the stuff of dreams. One day Harry would show what he could do, probably without even meaning to.

And that, Hermione knew, was when all of his grandiose ambitions would have a chance of being achieved. Purebloods were quick to side with a new force, especially if that force wasn't staunchly opposed to the Light. And Harry wasn't. At an earlier time, the idea that Harry might rationally weigh his options and willingly *choose* to become a Dark Wizard might have frightened her. She knew better now. Dark Wizards and Witches merely had a different belief system, believed in different kinds of magic, believed in *freedom*. If their magic didn't have the capacity to be so deadly, Hermione might have bought into their arguments. While most of them were bigots and looked down upon Muggleborns with disdain, it wasn't a prerequisite.

It was probably better not to even think about that. Harry probably hadn't even thought about it yet, though once his power was public knowledge, he'd be under tremendous pressure to choose. And either way, one side would be *very* unhappy with him.

Hermione normally didn't think that far in the future. It was pointless, because most predictions of what tomorrow would bring were usually wrong.

Again, she shook her head to clear it, and dipped the tip of her quill in ink. She began writing, trying to push her concerns out of her head. She gave it up as a lost cause just as quickly.

She set down her quill and sighed. She *shouldn't* have been surprised that Harry would play a crucial role in the final destruction of Voldemort, but hearing him speak the words was still chilling. They didn't even know the details, nor did they know when Voldemort would rise again.

Most believed that Voldemort had been destroyed forever on Halloween, 1981, his taint cleansed from their world. They were wrong, all of them. As long as he existed, as it was quite clear he did, if not yet in corporeal form, he was a threat. And until he could be found and eliminated, one had to assume that he was just waiting, regaining strength. The destruction of the Philosopher's Stone, and his defeat at the hands of tremendously powerful magical forces had driven him back to square one, had undone all he'd accomplished in

the past ten years. Harry believed this, and for once, Hermione had every bit as much conviction.

But all talk of Prophecies, destinies, and power aside; she needed to apologize to him. She wondered if Ginny already had. She expected so. Ginny had been, at first, a fully willing participant in her refusal to speak to Harry, but she had become steadily more reluctant and regretful. It was a good thing that Harry had broken first, because Ginny had been on the verge of giving it up. And that would have accomplished absolutely *nothing*, but to drive a wedge between Harry and Hermione.

She rubbed her temples tiredly. All of this thinking and soul-searching was beginning to give her a headache. She was also hungry, not only for nourishment, but for human interaction.

She packed up her things, loading them into her bag, and slung it over her shoulder. As she left the library, she noticed Luna Lovegood sitting innocently, reading the Quibbler...right-side-up for a change. As she left, she sighed. The awed way with which Harry regarded the enigmatic girl was something she wondered if she'd ever understand.

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Harry was beginning to wonder if he'd ever play a match in pleasant weather during his *life*. For the umpteenth time, or so it seemed, the weather was absolutely *miserable*. It was typical of November in Northern Scotland, but that didn't exactly provide comfort. The biting cold and harsh winds chilled him to his bones, and his drenched robes were both heavy, limiting his maneuverability and speed, and making it difficult to see, even after Hermione had cast a Water-Repelling Charm on his glasses.

Somewhere below him, Daphne was in the stands, cheering enthusiastically for him. The sole exception to parents being banned from school grounds was that they were allowed to support their children in Quidditch or other types of competitions. Daphne, of course, had taken full advantage of that. Harry had been very glad to see her, to be perfectly honest. His misgivings hadn't faded completely, but he still gave her an enthusiastic hug and whispered that he'd missed her. She did likewise.

They'd taken a long walk around the lake, talking about a number of things, discussing what she'd heard was going on in the wizarding world, and her continued quest to become a Trainer for the Aurors. Scrimgeour didn't like her, because she so freely used Dark Magic, and she knew that. Still, she hoped what she could bring to the table and teach the Ministry's best might overcome that. Alastor Moody, her mentor, had used Unforgivables more than once, albeit not with the lack of concern that Daphne did, and still been given a position, though he was now retired. Harry personally felt that Daphne needed something else in her life besides him, something else she could focus on.

He dove into the rain, wind whipping about him, thunder crackling in the distance, so loud that it could be heard over the screaming crowd. For once, Harry wasn't under a tremendous amount of pressure. The Serpent Chasers were playing well, overcoming mediocre defense by Tracey Davis, who still seemed to be learning the tricks and trades of her position. But with an 80 point lead and a panicked Ravenclaw team trying desperately to get back into the game, Harry merely needed to keep an eye on Cho as he searched. He doubted she would have any more luck than he did finding the Snitch in this weather. He hadn't even seen it since Madam Hooch had released it at the beginning of the match.

The crowd roared and booed as Pucey executed a questionable maneuver that resulted in him nearly colliding head on with one of the Raven Chasers. Most of the noise was outrage over the Serpent's actions, while the rest was Slytherins upset that they hadn't gotten the call. While *Snape* might have given it to them, Harry wasn't surprised or upset. Pucey, like Flint before him, always tried to bend the rules. Harry looped around the pitch, sparing a glance at the teacher's box, where Daphne and Remus were sitting. Daphne looked like she was enjoying herself, taunting Flitwick, her former Head of House, as if she was a teenage schoolgirl again. She wore a Slytherin scarf and green robes in support of him. It was, to Harry's eyes, one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen. He so rarely saw Daphne truly enjoy herself...at least when she wasn't laughing at something unfortunate, albeit harmless, that had happened to him. Remus, sitting next to her, seemed to waiting for Harry to do

something, indicating he was cheering his student, not the Serpent team as a whole. He was actively following the game.

Again Harry scanned the field, and again he saw no sign of the Snitch. He had completely tuned out Lee Jordan's horrifically biased commentary in order to maintain his focus, and he glanced down to follow the current play, making sure that Cho was still in his line of sight. He watched the Ravens execute a flawless scoring drive, dodging several Bludgers, including one from Grunitch that nearly took Roger Davies' head off, passing the Quaffle back and forth and diving around the defense that Malfoy and Pucey tried to mount (Montague was on the other side of the field, trying to draw the attention of the Raven Beaters.) Davies shot was perfect, curving just enough so that the trajectory was difficult to pick up while at the same time it would go straight through the right hoop. Davis had no chance, and Ravenclaw had cut the lead to 60.

Harry sighed. This had been a recurring problem for the last two years: the Serpents tended to become complacent after they built up a big lead, allowing the other team to get back into the game. Sometimes, they would respond with a run of their own; other times, they would fall behind and put the pressure on their Seeker to bail them out. Harry had seen this progression of events too many times.

He dove towards the rain-soaked pitch, partially out of boredom and partially to throw off Cho. He'd made the mistake of overusing the Wronski Feint and its variants, but as good as Harry was at executing them (something which was extraordinary for a player his age,) the other Seekers were beginning to catch on. However, in the rain, Cho couldn't be sure if he'd seen the Snitch or not, and followed him down, exercising due caution. She knew as well as he did that with his superior broom and handling, if he *had* seen the Snitch, it was far too late for her to do anything. He pulled up, racing along the slick grass, actually sending up a spray of water as his boots dragged across the soggy field. He gained altitude again, avoiding a half-hearted attempt by one of the Raven Beaters, Bradley, to bring him down. Only the Weasleys were good enough to even have a chance at knocking Harry down.

The game continued to drag on as both teams exchanged several goals. Fifteen minutes later, the Slytherin lead was 50, and the game was going on two hours. Harry's teeth were chattering loudly, and his body was numb from exposure. He couldn't feel his hands, and occasionally had to glance down to make sure they were still tightly wrapped around his broom. He was about to cast a Warming Charm when he finally caught a flash of gold. He checked Cho's position, and realized she hadn't seen it. Knowing that he didn't have the option of drifting over and therefore not attracting Cho's attention, he flattened his body against the shaft of his broom and launched himself through the air, trying to follow the upward flight of the Snitch. Cho saw him and raced after him, trying to gain altitude. Harry was far above the pitch now, at least 100 meters in the air. A flash of lightning broke his concentration, and he cursed in frustration. The Snitch was gone.

Harry shivered from the cold, his teeth rattling. Abruptly, he had a vision of Daphne's face, contorted with rage and malevolence, and his body flooded with adrenaline. *Dementors*.

He dove, no longer caring about the outcome of the match. Cho appeared to be frozen in mid-air, staring at the swarm of black-robed figures that were closing on the opposing Seekers. Harry closed his eyes, and tried desperately to fight off the mental attacks of the Guards of Azkaban. Then, with a sudden inspiration, he stopped his fall, took his right hand off his broom, and snapped his wrist, sending his wand into his frozen fingers. He raised it towards the sky, and then hesitated. Daphne's words of warning rang in his ears, overwhelming the screams of his mother and Voldemort's malevolent laughter as he cast a Slicing Curse at Hermione's limp form. "No one can know..."

He knew that it wasn't an option, and he began descending again. He needed to get to the ground. His vision was darkening; a fall from this height might be more than embarrassing; it could be fatal. The Dementors seemed to follow him as a group, descending down on the Pitch at the same rate that he did. Harry suddenly noticed a lone figure standing in the middle of the pitch, his wand arm raised, a furious expression on his face. It was Dumbledore.

Harry couldn't hear the words, but the largest Patronus he'd ever seen exploded from the tip of his Headmaster's wand. The silver Phoenix launched itself upward, flying right through Harry as it did. He felt a tingling sensation as he flew into it, and his fear began to fade. The second it had passed him, it returned. She heard Daphne cast the curse, heard his screams of agony. He felt ill and weak; his vision became blurry and slowly began to darken. He managed to slow himself before making a bad landing, stumbling off his broom and falling to his hands and knees in the mud and grass. He felt Daphne's presence and felt a hand grab him by the shoulder, gently pulling him to his feet. The rushing sound in his ears finally faded. He felt the urge to melt in his guardian's arms, but resisted it. She whispered something, and he shook his head weakly, indicating that he didn't understand. "You made the right choice," she said softly, and Harry nodded in agreement. Exhaustion overtook him, and his knees buckled. Daphne held him upright. "Let's go; Dumbledore is suspending the match. You aren't in any condition to fly, anyway. Nor, I suspect, is that Chang girl. She's badly shaken up."

Harry glanced up for a moment. Daphne was right, of course. Cho was on the opposite side of the pitch, several of her female teammates at her side. She was pale and though it was difficult to differentiate between the two in the rain, Harry thought she was crying. Davies was already arguing with Madam Hooch to suspend the game, and Pucey was on his way over.

The entire stadium groaned with it was announced that the game would be postponed and completed the next weekend, with the score remaining the same. Daphne began to lead Harry off the Pitch, hands on his shoulders. It looked like Ginny and Hermione were trying to fight their way through the crowd and get over to him. The rest of the Slytherin team was maintaining a respectful distance, though Malfoy was hardly maintaining a respectful *attitude*. His comment that Harry could, "be spooked by a house-elf" was silencing by a withering glare from Daphne, carrying with it the implied threat of physical agony if he didn't shut it. Draco was no fool, and complied.

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Daphne Greengrass was difficult to find when she didn't want to be found. The girl rarely spoke unless spoken to or if she had something

important to say. The soft-spoken girl could melt into a crowd with without any effort, then stay hidden for as long as she wanted to. Despite the fact that she was somewhat attractive, she simply didn't leave an impression on people, probably because she so rarely showed any kind of emotion. She was one of those people that could walk past a person and two minutes later, that person would forget they ever saw her.

So Harry had taken a different approach. He'd let her come to him. He had begun to notice the looks that Luna had mentioned, simple curious glances that might be innocuous to most, but the fact that the Greengrass Heiress was devoting an unusual amount of attention to him was significant in itself. She and Harry had not spoken since her 'test' on the very first day of school. It seemed that the only person she ever spoke to was Theodore Nott, and occasionally Blaise.

Of course, it quickly became evident that Daphne Greengrass wasn't going to make the first move. It would be a sign of weakness to come to him when he was the social inferior. Harry was a half-blood, she was a pureblood; it was as simple as that. It did not imply that she was unusually prejudiced; she had been taught to behave in a certain way from the age she was old enough to understand such things.

In the end, he'd found her when he least expected to. He'd simply been on his way back from Ancient Runes when he found her sitting silently on a stone bench that jutted out from the walls near a closed window. She appeared to be deep in thought, but her posture was completely upright. He approached slowly. "Greengrass," he said.

If he surprised her, she didn't show it. She didn't jump or snap her head towards him. She merely turned around, shifting on the ledge, and met his eyes. "Yes, Potter?" she asked. Her voice was bland, disinterested, but polite. As usual, one couldn't tell if she was irritated, pleased or angry. She wore her long, blond hair over her shoulders, and her robes were spotless, a rarity in the dusty corridors of the castle. Her features were sharp and defined, but not exactly delicate. *Refined*, Harry thought, was the best way to describe her.

"I've noticed the unusual amount of attention you've been giving me, and wonder if you might want to talk," Harry replied, trying to keep his voice as even as the girl. He wasn't sure he succeeded.

Again, Daphne didn't show the slightest sign of surprise. Either she'd expected this, or she was simply covering up her real reaction. She smiled slightly, though it was more of a smirk. "Is giving you an innocent glance once in a while really an unusual amount of attention?" she asked off-handedly, a bit of rare amusement in her voice. "I would think that your fame would afford you a great deal more than that from others."

Harry groaned inwardly. He'd made his first mistake barely fifteen seconds into this conversation. He'd made the assumption that not only was she looking at him for a purpose, but that he knew that purpose. Daphne was a master at this, the art of deflecting any questions she didn't want to answer while getting what she wanted to know from another. Many pureblood could speak for hours without learning a single bit of important information. "Perhaps that may be true," Harry admitted. "But you are hardly a normal admirer."

Daphne gave him a look that might have been pity, and he winced. "Flattery is hardly necessary, Potter," she said, settling back into a slightly amused expression. "Perhaps you should stop trying to play games you aren't equipped to play and simply ask what you are so desperate to ask?" she suggested off-handedly. Harry had to fight to keep himself from blushing. She was *embarrassing* him.

*I'm sure that's exactly what you want*, Harry grumbled to himself. "What do you want?" he finally asked, trying to sound more curious than irritated. Again, he wasn't completely able to keep his tone level.

"What makes you think I want *anything*?" she asked innocently. "After all, a few looks in your direction is nothing unusual. You may be the Boy-Who-Lived, but that means little to me. You are little more than a social inferior, Potter, and you'd best get used to that. Perhaps I was wrong in my original judgment of you."

Harry was shocked, not by her bluntness, even though it was unusual, or her harsh assessment of him. He was shocked by the fact that she'd said something he *knew* was untrue. Still, even with this break,

he needed to be careful here. He was in no position to sound arrogant or pompous. "Am I really?" he asked. "I would think that your family might have a bit more gratitude towards me." He didn't like taking undue credit, but few knew what had really happened in Godric's Hollow.

Daphne raised her eyebrows. "You actually remember...not that I'm impressed," she added. "I'm merely surprised. Yes, Potter, my family owes a debt of gratitude to you, and your defeat of the Dark Lord. I'm sure that you remember what I said about our involvement, about how he murdered my mother and sister for refusing to take the Mark."

Harry nodded. He *did* remember the story, one that was all too common. Voldemort was ruthless, punishing his followers for disobedience, disloyalty, and incompetence, as well as those that refused to serve him. Harry didn't know much about Daphne's father, and figured he make it a point to learn as much as he could.

"While it wouldn't be accurate to say that my family owes a debt to you," Greengrass continued, "my father is still grateful that your defeat of the Dark Lord happened when it did. The Dark Lord did not simply send his Death Eaters to attack my family; we had already split up and intended to flee to the continent. His followers abducted my mother and my sister, and sent my father a pensive memory of their executions. As you might expect, though we are sworn to the Dark, we have no love lost for the Dark Lord."

Harry nodded. "And what, exactly, does this have to do with me?" he asked, trying to sound curious, not confused.

"For now, it means little," Daphne admitted. "However, in the future, that may change. The Dark Lord will rise again, and soon," she said, concealing her true emotion about this possibility. "The signs are everywhere; former Death Eaters that had abandoned their Lord and melted back into everyday society are meeting more often. Suspected Death Eaters have been gathering at remote places in the countryside. At the Halloween Ritual, the magic turned the color of blood."

The last was a reference that Harry couldn't place, and it showed. Daphne didn't sigh or show any impatience, probably resigning

herself to the fact that Harry simply didn't know as much as she did, or as much of the details. "I expect you don't understand the significance of my last statement, as your guardian did not see fit to educate you properly in the traditions of either the Light or Dark. While the solstices and equinoxes are important to both groups, the day of Halloween holds a special significance to Dark Families, more so than those sworn to the Light. Rituals are traditionally held, rituals which are used to predict the fortunes of the family over the next year. They also can be used to predict catastrophes or unbalancing events to come."

Harry nodded, indicating he understood. "A series of complicated and intricate Rune Circles are used to create a beam of magic, which is expanded into a haze. The hue of the magic can be used to measure the status of the imbalance of Dark and Light, and also to determine the likelihood of conflict in the near future. Blood indicates that a conflict is inevitable, and will begin within the next two years. As you can imagine, the pureblood world, Light and Dark, were quite shocked by the results. While the scale of magic has tipped towards the Light for centuries, the imbalance has become greater since the First War. But beginning five years ago, the imbalance has begun to wane. The Darkness is growing stronger."

She regarded him for a long moment. "One of the strangest things I've ever witnessed occurred last year. The imbalance shifted dramatically towards the Light. I believe you know why."

He nodded. "Voldemort's defeat in 1991."

She nodded in reply. "Yes." She paused again, as if trying to find the proper words to explain something. "Such a shift has been seen only twice this century, and they were easily predictable. I'm sure you, even without the knowledge of the results, can tell me what events the Rituals preceded. Or, in one case, *coincided* with."

"Halloween 1981, and the defeat of Grindelwald in 1945."

Daphne nodded. "The point is, Potter, that signs abound that the Darkness is rising, returning to full strength. A storm approaches, a terrible, powerful storm that I suspect you will be in the middle of. And for that reason, my father has asked me to tell you this. When the

time comes, if we judge you as worthy then as we believe you will be, we will stand beside you. Do not think of this as the formation of an alliance," she cautioned, "merely a spark from which one can be formed."

Harry nodded. He understood the difference now, and knew that while Daphne's family was taking a step towards allying with him, it was more an expression of interest than anything permanent.

"I hope that you will consider what I have told you. I will continue to observe you, Potter, as that has been what I've been asked to do. I will judge you based on who you are, not what you *wish* to be."

She rose and departed. Harry immediately set off for the library. He had some research to do. He might have laughed at the irony if the situation wasn't so serious. Daphne had been right when she told him he needed to just let things happen as they would. His time would come. And with the help of his guardian and his friends, he would be ready for it.

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A/N: I've simply given up trying to plan out these things ahead of time. First, it takes forever. Second, I don't have that time. Third, my chapters almost never match what I had planned. At least it gives me a lot of plot twists to resolve or revive at later times. Still, I'm looking forward to writing Book 4, when I have a clear framework to work around. I don't plan to change it nearly as much as I've changed the last two.

I had to include the Dementor scene, for two reasons. First, it reinforces the bind that Harry is in: he has all this power, but he can't use it. He's also more resistant to Dementors, though it's more a matter of experience, knowing what to expect, and sheer determination that allows him to at least stay conscious. The second reason was that the Daphne (Dressler)/Harry pendulum is swinging back the other way again. Once more, he's becoming dependent on her. It's a built in subplot that will continue until one or both of them is dead. No matter how much he wants to, Harry can't leave Daphne behind.

As for the other Daphne (whol'm going to refer to in these author's notes and the text as Greengrass to avoid confusion), I'm sure it will seem a bit strange that Harry abandons his crazy pursuit...and then is approached bya pureblood family. Well, first off, the Greengrasses are a special case, something that will be important for the entire series. If you are wondering what will start the dominoes falling, remember the noteriety Harry got from the Triwizard Tournament. It's easy to see how he could use that to his advantage.

Hermione's got all kinds of issues right now. I want to make this absolute, 100 clear: HERMIONE HAS NO ROMANTIC FEELINGS OF ANY KIND FOR HARRY. NOR WILL SHE EVER HAVE ANY. Her jealousy issues are concerned with the fact that she has become so close to Harry and become used to being at his side most of the time. She'll get over it. She's also bothered by how cruel she was and frustrated with Harry for so dense that she had to take such action. We'll get a peek inside Ginny's head sooner or later.

To be completely honest, I feel this story is moving waaaay too slowly. As a result, the next chapter (Aptly titled: A Life in Transition) is going to be mostly narrative, with little dialogue. Because of the way I've changed the plot, most of what happens in the spring in PoA isn't going to happen the way it did. Basically, all that is left is Trelawny's Prophecy and the climax, with one addition Quidditch game and obviously some more interaction between the characters. On another note, if you are wondering why I haven't done an Ancient Runes class yet, it's because I don't want to write a passage detailing a class where the students are learning ancient languages. That's boring. As the class moves along, things will get more interesting.

One other thing to note. I know it does appear that Harry is weak and easily manipulated at times, but that's only because of the way I'm writing this thing. Harry is thirteen years old, and as much as he's twisted it in his mind, he's still prone to errors in logic. I warned you that Harry wouldn't be throwing Death Eaters around like confetti, and that extends to students that have been trained longer than he has. Daphne had wanted to start training him the summer previous, but that was impossible. If you are looking for an obnoxious "in control" Harry (I use the politest terms that I can), look elsewhere. That isn't realistic.

And I'm not writing this because I feel a need to cater to everyone, I'm just being helpful.

## Chapter 16: A Life in Transition

For the first time since he arrived at Hogwarts, Christmas Break passed relatively uneventfully. Now that Harry was safe inside the wards of Dressler Manor, Daphne seemed to be even more relaxed. It didn't hurt that he was still riding high from the *pounding* that Slytherin had put on Ravenclaw during the resumed Quidditch match, Harry's Serpents outscoring the Ravens 120-10 before Harry brought it to a merciful end.

While they didn't stay over, as they had previous Christmases, Tonks, now a certified Auror, and Andromeda, both stopped by Dressler Manor frequently to visit Harry and Daphne. Tonks was finally making enough money to rent her own flat, and she seemed to have become even more stubborn and insane as a result. Still, there was one thing that was guaranteed to please her: Harry's rapid progress with his Metamorphmagus training.

Harry had been able to change his hair and eye color without a great deal of effort, though he still had trouble with certain colors and shades. Tonks' mirror, that showed the viewer what they wanted to look like, was extremely useful. However, Harry's 'big sister' had finally decided to move on from such simple skills. They had begun with trying to change the length of his hair, and it had been several days before he's developed any kind of consistency. He overdid it twice, and every last hair on his head fell out. Tonks had to help him fix this, even as she cackled with glee and snapped photographs that Harry was sure would show up again at the most inopportune moments imaginable. Like his wedding day or a first date.

Still, that wasn't all the progress he'd made with his eccentric older sister, (who would often play the part, arriving with black hair and green eyes.) He also tried to learn to change the shape of his eyes, something that didn't seem particularly useful, but that Tonks assured him was a crucial step to learning how to change his body shape and manipulate his bone structure without doing serious harm to his body. Most of all, he, Daphne and Tonks were pleased to discover that his massive intake of new power didn't seem to be affecting his progress or proficiency with his latent talent. Tonks promised, on her last day at Dressler Manor, that they'd begin working on changing facial

features the following summer. However, she also insisted that he pass an ‘exam’ in which she would direct him to change one or more things about his appearance. She even found a pair of glasses and pretended to write notes on a clipboard. Daphne had to leave the room because her laughter was so distracting. He passed most the test, and Tonks gave him a longer hug than usual when she returned to her flat. She also promised to listen for any change in Scrimgeour’s attitude towards Daphne.

That hadn’t been everything going on during the Christmas holiday. Daphne had finally begun training him in earnest, beginning with refining what he already knew. Physical training would begin next summer. Daphne and Harry spent hours in her training center perfectly his spell casting. Despite his belief that he’d ‘mastered’ spells such as the Disarming Charm and Stunning Spell, Daphne showed him he still had a great deal to learn. She helped him perfect his wand movements, corrected his pronunciation and showed him how to cast spells with greater efficiency and conservation of both movement and magical power. She showed him how to vary the strength of spells by determining how much power he would *need*, and focusing on the intended result.

The other thing she did was coach him in dueling. She showed him a variety of starting positions, along with some of her favorite evasion techniques, and preached over and over the concept of “fire-and-maneuver,” which she swore by. Harry learned more in those sessions than he had in any of the books he had read. Being taught by the Grey Maiden really had no parallel.

Daphne was a natural instructor, and Harry didn’t think it was just because he was her ward. She was strict and decisive, gave clear instructions and rewarded success with praise, but refused to accept failure, insisting that he repeat a step until he had mastered it. As for the spells he thought he’d ‘mastered?’ Daphne accepted nothing less than perfection. She was not cruel, she merely took advantage of Harry’s competitive drive until he was physically exhausted and magically strained.

The end result was that Harry became more confident in his dueling abilities than he ever had been before. Daphne had the real-life

experience to illustrate all of the uses and shortcomings of almost every spell in existence. She told him that improvisation was a skill one was born with, it was not something learned. She knew this quite well; thinking while fighting was not one of her strong suits. Harry wasn't even sure he'd be able to pass on half the knowledge he'd accumulated over the break to his friends.

Still, the entire break wasn't merely comprised of training of one sort of another, though it certainly seemed that way. Training wasn't tedious or something he wanted to avoid; he was an eager student and relished a chance to learn from the best. And Daphne was, with the possible exception of *her* mentor, Alastor Moody, the best pure duelist in Britain. Others might have more power, such as Voldemort or Dumbledore, or more brute strength, but while Daphne was powerful in her right, it was the grace and fluidity of both her strategy and movements that made her so deadly.

Harry was also aware that Daphne was considerably less merciful towards her enemies. She would kill without second thought and torture without hesitation, as long as she judged it the best course of action and necessary to reaching her goals. That ruthlessness was a part of her, and Harry had been forced to accept that. Still, it was no surprise that she had been demonized by Death Eaters as Dumbledore's answer to Bellatrix Lestrange or Evan Rosier.

Harry flew often, though usually to unwind from a stressful day or to clear his head. He was concerned about how he was going to proceed with Blaise. He had decided that he liked the boy a great deal and thought he could be a great friend. His knowledge, Harry knew, had to be a bonus. He wasn't completely sure he agreed with Hermione's assessment of his situation, but he knew that he had shot too high in the first place. There had been no further communication from either him or Daphne Greengrass, reinforcing Harry's belief that things were going to be proceeding slowly for the time being.

Another thing constantly on his mind was his feelings for Ginny, feelings that he had a chance to contemplate for the first time in a while. The end result was the same; he simply couldn't understand exactly what it was he was feeling. Ginny made him more cheerful with her very presence; even the thought of her could lift his spirits.

That sort of thing was driving him absolutely insane because he could not decide *what* it was he felt. He'd considered speaking with Tonks, but the thought of the sure embarrassment and humiliation that would undoubtedly ensue before any useful advice quickly killed that idea. Nor did Harry have any desire to consult Hermione or Daphne. The former would probably just compound his confusion and he wasn't sure Daphne would be of much help in this regard. It would also bring back painful memories he had no desire to force her to relive. At least the urge to kiss her had departed for the time being...

Besides that fare bit of soul-searching, he'd done his homework, of course, not that it was much of a challenge. With the exception of McGonagall's assignment to write an essay which compared and contrasted the difficulties inherent in object-creature Transfiguration and creature-object Transfiguration, most of his other classes assigned light reading, or, in the case of Ancient Runes, reviewing the information they had already learn. The Transfiguration assignment required a great deal of research, and he and Hermione ended up sending a draft of the other's essay to critique. It was always interesting to see what obscure information his bookworm best friend would insist he include. She also tended to be ridiculously anxious, despite the fact that most of her work was not only the best in the class, but better than that of the majority of the students a year ahead of them.

The other assignment that gave him some difficulty was from Snape. He'd been able to compose an essay on the uses of Aconite easily enough, but Snape had also sent him and Elisha Moon ingredients for a complicated Healing Potion that he wanted them to brew over break. As it turned out, it took just short of two weeks to brew properly. That potion currently resided in a vial in his trunk protected by Daphne's Unbreakable and Climate-Control Charms. Harry was pretty sure it was a bit off, but it was an extremely challenging assignment. Not that that would matter to Snape, of course.

He'd also spent time utilizing the Dressler Family Library. Specifically, he'd been reading up on pureblood traditions and more information about goblins. On the subject of the former, Daphne seemed to have at least a working knowledge of the major Dark pureblood rituals, as she seemed a bit concerned by what Greengrass had told him about

the Halloween Ritual. She'd helped him find a good amount of literature that was both informative and easily understood by someone who knew as little as he did. Harry had focused on the holidays for both Light and Dark Wizards, and the traditions, rituals and intricacies of the celebrations and ceremonies. He hoped he knew enough to be able to draw upon his knowledge the next time he needed to.

There had been a few interesting events, however, mostly related to Sirius Black. First, Daphne had been outraged when Fudge had flat-out refused to use Dementors to search the Forbidden Forest. Then he had announced that despite the fact that the Dementors had gotten loose on the Grounds during the previous Quidditch match, (an event that had sparked anger from many in the wizarding community,) the Aurors that were supervising them were being re-assigned to investigate rumors of secret meeting between suspected Death Eaters in the North. Daphne had commented sarcastically that, "I suppose we can take solace in the fact that His Majesty has actually acknowledged that we didn't capture or kill *all* of Voldemort's supporters."

The second had come on Christmas Day. Harry had sent his own gifts off three days earlier: A book on the history of Wizard-Muggle relations and a package of Sugar Quills for Hermione; new Quidditch gloves for Ginny; and a photo album of Harry using his metamorphic abilities for Tonks. This last one containing the most bizarre combinations of hair color and length, eye color and shape, and facial expressions that he could think of. It was ridiculous and childish, but then again, so was Tonks. He had a feeling that those photos would also reappear at inopportune moments, but he supposed that he'd have to deal with that when the time came.

His gifts included a green and black Weasley sweater, homemade fudge, and a book of photographs apparently taken by Colin Creevey from Ginny; a book containing biographies of the most powerful witches and wizards in modern history from Hermione; another book on Metamorphmagi from Tonks; and a set of adjustable combat robes from Daphne. Those he expected, but there was still one package left, one that Daphne had been surprised to see. The fact that there was no card was the first surprise and possible cause for concern. The

second was that it contained a Firebolt; a state-of-the-art racing broom that made his trusty Nimbus look like an antique. It had been a race as to whether Harry would give it to Daphne to examine or she would grab it herself first.

His guardian had performed more tests than Harry could imagine, but was absolutely flabbergasted to discover that the broom was completely harmless. There was no doubt as to whom it came from, of course; Daphne explained that Sirius would have been able to access his family's fortune quite easily and with no questions asked, but how he'd managed to order it and have it sent through the wards of Dressler Manor was puzzling. In addition, Daphne swore she couldn't remember seeing it delivered.

Harry had been thrilled by the prospect of riding the new broom, and as much as he was attached to his Nimbus, he had read the advertisements in the *Prophet* as much as any Quidditch-obsessed boy or girl in Britain. After all, he could give his old broom to Ginny, or, if she resisted accepting charity, he could at least lend it to her on a case-by-case basis. Both of his friends had expressed concern when he had Owled them, but Hermione seemed to be just confused about how Daphne had failed to detect any built-in jinxes. Ginny was more enthusiastic about the broom itself. *She thinks about Quidditch as much as I do...*

Though he did have some lingering doubts, he still argued with his guardian to be allowed to keep the broom. Daphne had finally given in, though not before riding it herself. There were no incidents, but it was clear that she still wasn't happy with the entire thing.

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Blaise Zabini was an enigma. An enigma that Harry needed to solve...for all of their sakes. He was a puzzle that seemed to be missing random pieces. Harry couldn't understand why he wanted so badly to believe the boy's intentions were honest. He had *admitted* to Harry that, originally, they were not.

Daphne was quite wary of Zabini's family, and for good reason. His Songstress mother possessed an extraordinarily rare power, with beauty that could captivate any man, beauty she could use to

manipulate men into giving her exactly what she wanted. This despite the fact that she was rumored to be quite advanced in years, though these rumors could never be confirmed. Songstresses, in addition to having flawless voices, could use their music to inspire a beaten army to victory, or dishearten a hardened foe. Yet, somehow, she had managed to escape the war entirely. Blaise's father was less well known, being the seventh of Arabella's husbands, and the only one to survive five years of marriage with the woman. The others had died of unknown causes, though it was also rumored that she had poisoned them and collected their fortunes.

Harry felt the woman's son approaching from behind him before he spoke. He did not turn to face him, instead, focusing on the Sleeping Draught sloshing around in the cauldron in front of him. He was in a small classroom, checking up on his latest project assigned by Snape during their special lessons. Beside him was a piece of parchment on which he was taking notes about the changes from the previous day. He'd show it to his Head of House during that night's Occlumency lesson.

"Potter, I think it's time that the two of us had a talk," Blaise drawled from over his shoulder. His tone wasn't *arrogant* or *demanding*...well, no *more* arrogant and demanding than Blaise's usual tone of voice, but Harry could hear an unexpected urgency in his voice that made him pause.

"I suppose it is," Harry replied, checking his instructions and then giving the boiling mixture three counter-clockwise turns. He tried to block Blaise's presence out of his mind; he needed full concentration for this. The Black boy behind him seemed to recognize this and remained silent until Harry had finished his task and used his wand to lift the cauldron off the fire. He had exactly fifty minutes before he would need to reheat the potion, add two more ingredients, and perform a series of stirs. He should, baring any problems, be able to turn in the completed potion tomorrow. He wasn't sure what Moon's timetable was, and he doubted that Snape would give extra points for completing his assignment before the budding Potions Mistress, but it couldn't hurt...assuming his potion met the high standards that Professor Snape expected.

He turned slowly to face Blaise, who was leaning slightly against the dungeon wall. The boy's face was expressionless, though his dark eyes followed Harry's. "What is it that you'd like to talk to me about, Zabini?" Harry asked slowly.

Blaise raised an eyebrow. "Not on first name terms anymore, Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm not sure we ever should have been. We were never really friends in the first place. We both were more intent on getting something else out of our relationship than simple companionship. You wanted information, I wanted advice and influence. Perhaps that is a situation that might create an alliance, but it's hardly the basis of a stable friendship."

Blaise nodded. "I can't argue with you there. Truth be told, I was surprised that you trusted me so easily. I was rather shocked when you blurted out Granger's little secret, and took me into your confidence like that. Did that have anything to do with the fact that you two didn't speak for about a week."

Harry met his eyes, and nodded. Blaise gave a non-committal shrug. "If I was your friend, I suppose I should say that I'm sorry for driving a wedge between you two. Since I suppose I'm not, and I never was..."

"Forget it," Harry said firmly. "It's behind both of us...why did you seek me out like this? I understand why you wanted me alone, but it took you quite a while."

Blaise shrugged again. "I honestly thought you'd come to me first. I guess I was wrong."

"I've had a lot on my mind," Harry admitted.

Blaise nodded. "I'm sure."

There was a long, awkward pause. Neither one of them wanted to be the first to leave, or to offer a chance at a true relationship. Harry was embarrassed that he had allowed his ambition to run away with him, and Blaise simply felt guilty for taking advantage of Harry's inexperience.

Finally, Blaise broke the silence. “Well, I suppose there are only two things that can happen now. Obviously, you’ve thought better of trying to gather allies at this time, and you have no reason to trust me. Still, either we go our separate ways or we try to become real friends. I wasn’t lying when I said I liked you, Harry. It has nothing to do with who you are, or any directions from my parents. You’re quite intelligent, and you’ve got an honest nature that one doesn’t see very often from people in this House.”

Harry considered this. Blaise wasn’t trying to flatter him; it actually sounded as if he truly admired Harry. While Harry felt that perhaps Blaise was exaggerating his honesty, a compliment was a compliment, and he’d made it without any evident exterior motive. He could respond in kind, though he really didn’t know Blaise well enough to do so convincingly. He settled on a different response. “I’m willing to give it another shot as well. But I need to know that if I tell you anything important, it will stay confidential. If you can’t do that, can’t keep secrets from your parents, then this conversation is over, and we can simply go our separate ways. What I say to you is intended for your ears only, not for the ears of anyone related to you.”

Blaise nodded stiffly. “It would be difficult,” he admitted. “My parents follow everything I do, and expect me to report what I’ve learned from the other students. If they get suspicious...”

Harry shook his head to show that he didn’t care about that. “I need to know if you can do it. Yes or No, no excuses or exceptions. I don’t take kindly to betrayal, Blaise.”

The boy was silent for a long moment. Then he nodded. “I can do it.” He shook his head, smiling slightly. “This is so awkward,” he said, mostly to himself. Harry shared that opinion. “I’ll help you with whatever I can, as long as you make sure to talk to me, I do get lonely sometimes.”

From the tone of his voice, it was clear that he was trying to amuse Harry. The Boy-Who-Lived smiled back at him. “I’d like that. If you don’t mind, I’ll try to keep you away from Hermione; she *really* doesn’t seem to like you.”

Blaise laughed. "That's for sure. I suppose I was quite an arse to her, but I don't think my behavior is responsible for her attitude towards me. I think I represent something to her that she really doesn't like. So she takes it out of me."

"You aren't exactly innocent either," Harry reminded him. "You bait her often, and I don't like that. Hermione is my best friend, close to a sister, really. She is much closer to me than you are, and therefore, much more important. If I have to choose between you, there really is no choice. You'd lose every time."

Blaise nodded, understanding. "I'll keep that in mind." He paused, as if considering whether to ask a question or keep his mouth shut. He chose the former. "What do you think Weasley thinks of me?" he asked curiously. "She doesn't show her emotions nearly as much as Granger, though she obviously wasn't comfortable with my presence...can't say I blame her, mind."

Harry thought for a moment. "I'm not sure what Ginny thinks of you. She was obviously upset that I shared Hermione's secret with you, but I think she's waiting to find out more about you. She's not one to quickly pass judgment."

Blaise nodded. "No, she isn't...at least, that's my impression of her. I know some of her friends in Slytherin, or I'm at least on friendly terms with them. Grunitch and Quinn aren't fools, I'll tell you that. Grunitch is a sharp one. Quinn knows when to talk and when to keep her mouth shut."

Harry nodded. He hadn't realized that Blaise conversed with Slytherins from the year below them. In fact, he didn't really know anything about whom Blaise associated with. That needed to change. "I got the same impressions," Harry told him. "I think Ginny can learn a lot from them."

"You *really* care about her, don't you, Potter?" Blaise asked. "Almost as much as Granger. At least....well, *her* I can understand; you two were pretty much alone during your first year. But Weasley? She sort of threw herself at you during her Sorting and you've been friends since...at least, that's what it looks like to me."

Harry had to hold back a snort as he remembered how Ginny had soaked his robes with anxious tears after being Sorted into Slytherin. It was impossible to know if her fears had been justified, as it was her association with *him* that led to the strife between her and her brothers. While perhaps to one inside Harry's close circle of friend, the episode would not have been humorous, from outside, Harry could imagine how ridiculous it must have looked for Harry to be forced to console some girl who he'd never met until that day. And stranger still to see the look of promised pain and suffering that Harry had turned on Draco Malfoy when the boy had opened his mouth to mock the Boy-Who-Lived and his new companion.

He realized Blaise was staring at him, and kept his tone level and steady only with conscious effort. "Ginny is a close friend, nothing more," he assured him. He refused to say anything else until he trusted the boy more.

Blaise shook his head. "I know *that*, Potter," he replied. "What I wanted to know was *how* and *why*."

Harry gave him a questioning gaze, almost a glare. "And why exactly should I tell you *that*? Just because we've clarified our relationship doesn't make me any more apt to tell you some of my closest secrets. I made the mistake of trusting you without reason once; I will not make it again."

Instead of protesting or simply giving a resigned shrug, as he might expect, Blaise instead gave him a small, satisfied smile. It was at this moment that Harry realized that the boy had been testing him. He shook his head. "I'm not *that* stupid, Blaise."

The boy grinned. "Good thing, 'cause I was starting to wonder if I'd really gotten you. Can't say I would have been really impressed with that." He extended a hand. "Let's do this the right way."

Harry extended his own and grasped the other boy's hand firmly, meeting Blaise's dark eyes with an intense emerald gaze of his own. "Sounds like a good idea to me."

Harry's 'new' friendship with Blaise Zabini seemed destined to stick around a great deal longer than the first. Rather than both boys

spending time with each other because of ulterior motives, they helped each other out and provided companionship when it was possible. Harry helped Blaise with some difficult Potions assignments; Blaise helped him understand some of the more complicated pureblood rituals. Harry, Hermione, and Ginny continued to make use of the Room of Requirement, but Blaise was barred until he could prove himself trustworthy. Blaise appeared determined to prove that trustworthiness, and neither violated their unspoken agreement nor informed Filch of the location of the Room.

Other than that, the months following his Christmas Break seemed to pass in a flurry of everyday activity. Sirius Black hadn't been heard from since that Halloween, and most seemed to believe that the threat had passed. Harry knew better, but that didn't stop him from allowing himself to relax outside with his friends. Once the snow had melted, the weather that spring was excellent, with much warmer temperatures and calmer weather than the miserable autumn months.

In addition to Quidditch, which Ginny and Harry practiced both with the team and on their own, they would often visit Hagrid or simply relax in a small clearing near the lake, doing homework or discussing the day's classes. They made heavy use of Harry's new Firebolt, a broom that he kept in his voice-locked trunk in order to prevent theft. Malfoy couldn't *stand* the fact that another student had a broom that was better than his, and Harry wouldn't put vandalism or theft past the pompous boy. However, despite the fact that the Firebolt clearly handled better than the Nimbus 2000 he was so fond of, it simply didn't feel as *natural*. Harry had become an expert at turning every potential shortcoming of his Nimbus into a strength, and the Firebolt was almost *too* perfect. Despite Pucey's urgings, he told his Captain that he'd use the Nimbus in the actual matches. The boy finally gave in after Harry gave the broom to him and proceeded to fly circles around him with his older-model broom. Harry always took pride in using superior technique and tactics to simply using raw speed or minuscule turning radii.

On the academic front, Harry was beginning to see the curriculum becoming much more specific and detailed, while it lessened the focus on the general skills that had characterized Harry and Hermione's first two and a half years at Hogwarts. Transfiguration

and Potions had already progressed into more advanced individual study; Charms, Herbology, and Astronomy were more focused on learning the theory that would be essential to later studies in those courses.

History of Magic, which had been getting steadily worse from the first class he'd attended, was another matter altogether. Not only was the class still comprised entirely of a sleep-inducing lecture by the monotonous voice of the ghost teacher, Professor Binns, but Harry was also frustrated by the lack of a clear chronological progression of their studies. They had started the year studying Medieval and Renaissance-era goblin rebellions and giant wars. They were *still* studying Medieval and Renaissance-era goblin rebellions and giant wars. In between, they had dabbled in Ancient Egyptian Magic and learned a bit about the Roman and Greek Wizards. Moreover, not only was it obvious that Binns' favorite topic was goblin rebellions and giant wars, but the rumors of ghosts having perfect memories were clearly exaggerated. Frequently, Binns would re-teach a lesson he'd spent several class periods on just a week earlier. He would jump between centuries, and his tests demanded a wealth of knowledge he simply didn't provide. Harry did a great deal of independent reading when a subject interested him, and he could proudly say that he might be the only Slytherin able to sit through a week of Binns' lectures and *not* fall asleep once. Hermione was quite possibly the only Gryffindor, though because she did *nothing* but take notes for the entire period and was in a different class than Harry, such estimates weren't always reliable. Not that it really *mattered*, of course.

The other thing that made academic work during Third Year different was the beginning of elective courses. Harry was taking two, Ancient Runes and Care of Magical Creatures, while Hermione took those two plus Arithmacy. Ancient Runes wasn't exactly as Harry had envisioned it, though he was nonetheless determined to continue in the course. Professor Ogola was a Black African woman from Kenya who had attended the Magical History Institute of Cairo. While she had focused on Antiquity and Ancient civilization, there was a wide consensus that she would much better History of Magic teacher than Binns. Unfortunately, the much, *much* younger woman was in her

early thirties and in just her second year of teaching at Hogwarts, and Binns had seniority.

The first year of the class, however, was focused more on understanding and becoming competent in the universal system of writing: runes, that was prevalent across most Western magical cultures. While they obviously differed by area, the basic tenants of grammar, spelling and meanings remained the same. Professor Ogola had promised that they would be covering the actual civilizations that used the Runes beginning in Fourth Year and continuing into N.E.W.T.-level classes.

Hermione reported that Arithmacy was, as Blaise had rather rudely predicted, focused primarily on math operations and functions that she already had a much better grasp of than her wizarding classmates, (or her fellow Muggleborns, for that matter.) However, as *she* had hoped, they also did side-work involving the magical properties and cultural significances of certain numbers.

Care of Magical Creatures had hit a bit of a wall since Harry had been sent to the Hospital Wing by a rampaging hippogriff. Fearing (with reason) that another such incident could get him sacked, Hagrid was much more wary of bringing in any creatures that could, by *any* stretch of the imagination, be considered dangerous. He'd told them more about Flobberworms than Harry knew existed, and bored them with almost every second of it. It was all the more painful for Harry, who constantly tried to impress upon Hagrid that he was blameless in the incident with the hippogriff and that he'd probably be better served having the class learn about and work with "more interestin' creatures." Hagrid would hear none of it. Still, they did manage to learn about Fire Crabs, Bowtruckles and even owls, specifically, how magical owls differed from common wild owls. Harry learned that 'owl gatherers' would go into the wild all over the world and perform tests to pick out owls that were imbued with natural magical ability, catch them, train them, and sell them to the general wizarding public. As self-serving as the process seemed, Harry learned that it was necessary to separate magical owls from normal owls, because magical owls had a tremendous natural advantage over their non-magical brethren that could greatly upset an ecosystem.

Transfiguration continued to be an extremely challenging class. They had covered an enormous amount of theory work that dealt with almost anything that could be turned into something else. The practical application had been limited to *existing* small, similar objects or living creatures. That was going to change, beginning the following year. McGonagall explained how her most advanced N.E.W.T. Transfiguration students were currently conducting a project in conjunction with Defense Against the Dark Arts students in which they either conjured solid objects to be used as shields or Transfigured other objects to such a form, and test them against a variety of advanced and powerful spells. McGonagall even gave a brief description how, during the Siege of Hogwarts, she had literally Transfigured the ground beneath Death Eaters into liquid, then, as they fell into these small 'pools,' she would return it to solid ground. The implications and utilities of such skills were not lost on Harry. It was clear that McGonagall could be a feared and respected combatant even if she had only a working knowledge of other offensive spells. Harry could imagine how she might conjure boulders to crush Death Eaters beneath them, animate the stone gargoyles and statues and even change the robes of a Death Eater to stone and freeze them in their tracks, wearing, quite literally, *stone* garments. Harry knew he'd never reach that potential or ability, but a N.E.W.T.-level education in Transfiguration could serve him well in coming conflicts.

On the social front, Harry was doing his best to act his own age. Seeing as very few of his classmates were doing the same, it was rather difficult. As much as he tried to think otherwise, it was as if every conversation or exchange that he had with one of his fellow Slytherins was a social test; an examination to prove whether or not Harry belonged in their social class. He tried to avoid the traps Greengrass had so easily sprung on him, spending time around his classmates, listening instead of talking, trying to learn as much as he could about what they spoke of. At the same time, he tried to make it less of a priority by spending time with those who would accept him as an equal much more readily. He, of course, spent the majority of his time with Hermione and Ginny, but he would also engage others in conversation from time to time. One of the students he spoke to often was Susan Bones.

Susan personified the positive aspects of the Hufflepuff House. She was hard-working, dependable and cautious, without being as cowardly as the inaccurate stereotype. The reputation of Hufflepuffs also included the belief that they didn't hold strong convictions and tended to bow to the more assertive Houses. If one judged all of Hufflepuff by the character of Susan Bones, such an assumption would never be made. Susan was a mature, confident young woman, and as the niece of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement Head, Amelia Bones, she was quite well known.

Harry also tried to engage Neville Longbottom, and was mostly successful. He'd been spending much less time with Ron Weasley and the other Gryffindors in his year, socializing more with Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. The effects were obvious. While his shy nature at first held him back, Neville, when he didn't feel the need to conform to gain acceptance, was a very talkative and intelligent individual, if still wary of taking strong opinions that went against the majority. Hermione continued to be on a very friendly basis with most of the Ravenclaws, though Harry didn't find as much in common with them. Though he worked hard and had a desire to learn, he simply didn't possess the same academic drive as the others. Harry figured it was mostly because he was looking towards the future as his motivation, while Hermione and the Ravenclaws had more of a desire to learn for the sake of learning. Nevertheless, he remained on friendly terms with the likes of Terry Boot, Mandy Brocklehurst, Lisa Turpin and Daphne's distant relative, Michael Crawford.

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If there was one word to describe Ronald Billius Weasley, it would be *infuriating*.

The boy was an idiot. A complete and total idiot. A mindless, Gryffindor-ish, ignorant, impulsive *idiot* with no concern for anyone but himself and his family...excluding his *sister*, of course... at least most of the time.

Ginny had nearly hexed her older brother in the middle of the Gryffindor Common Room, and had to be forcibly restrained by the twins. Hermione, on the other hand, had slapped him hard across the

face and shoved him into the fireplace when he'd made a grab at Crookshanks. Fortunately, there had been no fire burning at the moment. Harry, at least for the time being, would have preferred that it *had* been burning. *Strongly.*

McGonagall had been beside herself when she'd discovered the two Gryffindors surrounded by crowd of enthusiastic observers, with Harry standing off to the side, his wand leveled at the youngest Weasley boy's temple. Ginny, as already mentioned, was straining against the arms of Fred and George, probably intending to use the Bat-Bogey Hex and then pummel her brother's face flat.

The entire altercation had begun when Hermione had taken Harry and Ginny into her Common Room so they could use a book she'd gotten from the library to study for their respective Charms tests. Harry felt such outside reading wasn't necessary to ace the examination, but he wasn't going to fight Hermione. The entire situation had degenerated when Ron, standing on one of the staircases leading to the dormitories, had loudly declared that Hermione's 'monster' had eaten his rat. As proof, he held his blood-speckled sheets aloft in one fist. He had then demanded that Hermione get rid of that 'bloody animal' before he disposed of Crookshanks out one of the windows.

Hermione, understandably, had drawn her wand and nearly hexed the boy on the spot. He'd unfortunately run downstairs before she could. As the crowd gathered, they had exchanged a number of *pleasantries*. Hermione had been screaming at him by the end of it. Harry had been about to intervene, possibly with a Stunning Spell, when the Head of Gryffindor House had arrived. She had undoubtedly seen his wand before he had a chance to re-holster it, and her stare had been sufficient to cease Ginny's struggles against her brothers.

She had been given a number of greatly varying reports on what had happened, including a mostly incomprehensible one by a soot-covered Ron Weasley and a far more concise one by a tearful and apologetic Hermione.

Then she had made her decision. Both Ron and Hermione were banned from the remaining two Hogsmeade weekends, and given 10 days of detention to be split between her and Filch. And Harry and Ginny were barred from the Gryffindor Common Room...*permanently*. She also ordered the two Slytherins to participate in four of Hermione and Ron's ten detentions, said she would be sending a letter home to all of their parents, as well as, of course, a message to Snape. Finally, she declared that any future problems between the two Gryffindors would be dealt with *harshly*. To everyone in the room capable of independent or creative thought, that implied suspension or expulsion. It was remarkable how quickly Hermione's face had gone from bright red to deathly pale. Ron had been similarly frightened, likely envisioning his next encounter with his mother. Harry had heard enough about Molly Weasley from her daughter to understand the source of his fear.

That said, with Ginny trying to console a horrified Hermione somewhere in the castle, Harry had no sympathy for the youngest male Weasley. He walked through one of the corridors near the Divination Tower, thinking and trying to extinguish his anger. He had an Occlumency lesson that night, and Snape would not be pleased if Harry was unable to manage his emotions because of some "juvenile disagreements."

He continued to make steady, if slow, progress in his work with Snape. The man showed little patience and expected a lot, and Harry understood that. He did the reading he was assigned; he practiced before he went to bed, and had actually had fewer nightmares since he began working with the man. Still, he was unable to hold off Snape's attack for more than fifteen seconds, and it strained him a great deal to perform even this task. Snape was relentless, but Harry understood that he had to be. Still, he wished Snape would give him a break once in a while.

So immersed was Harry in his thoughts that he quite literally collided with Sybil Trelawney, the Divination teacher. The surprise caused her to drop the glass bottles she was carrying, and they shattered as they hit the floor. The woman was unnaturally thin, and though her bulky robes and shawl concealed just how thin she was, combined with her over-sized glasses, they made her resemble a beetle. She did not

appear particularly upset by the destruction of her sherry bottles. Her glassy eyes shot upward towards his partially-hidden scar, and her eyes widened. "Harry Potter," she said, almost in reverence, her voice an excited whisper, "I have foreseen this meeting between us." Harry blinked. He'd heard that the woman was a fraud and didn't want to believe it, but this was a bit more than he'd been expecting.

Harry drew his wand, intending to clean the mess on the floor. But as he did so, he noticed that the woman had suddenly stiffened, her eyes darkening. She opened her mouth to speak, but when she did, it was clearly not her own voice.

*...THE RETURN OF THE DARK LORD DRAWS CLOSER...THE DARKNESS HAS BEGUN ITS RISE ONCE MORE...SOON, WHEN THE MOON SHINES FULL IN THE SKY, THE SERVANT WILL RETURN TO HIS MASTER...THE TRAITOR, THE DARK ONE, AND THE BETRAYED SHALL MEET ONCE MORE...ON THE NIGHT THE MOON SHINES FULL IN THE SKY, THE SERVANT WILL RETURN TO HIS MASTER...*

Harry watched, frozen in surprise, as the apparently not-so-false prophet collapsed, falling unconscious to the wet floor, and lay still. If not for the rise and fall of her chest, Harry would swear that she was dead.

xx

A/N: Again, sorry this took so long to finish.

An ongoing complaint has been that I've made Harry much too weak. Well, I sort of warned you that this would happen, and I sort of knew that it would happen to an extent myself, but the truth is that Harry *is* very reliant on both Daphne and on Hermione. The former is the result of the fact that Daphne spent as much time with him as humanly possible. Most of us have had to make the adjustment to when our parents aren't there for us all the time; this is similiar, though a bit more extreme. Regardless of upbringing, 13 in 13. I read a lot of people who argue that experience can make someone more mature. Well, to an extent that is true, but biologically speaking, it's impossible. It's evident that Rowling intends for wizards to mature much faster than their Muggle counterparts. The brain doesn't really

reach adult stage until the late teens/early 20s, and even then there is still growth going on. But even accelerating that process, Harry's still going to take a little while to become independent. In fact, it could be argued that certain things are keeping him from becoming independent. First, he fears being alone. In this way he is quite similar to Dursley-reared Harry; he clings to Hermione (just as she tends to cling to him, but it's less obvious because I write mostly from Harry's perspective) and is very concerned about losing her companionship. That's why it looks like he is submissive towards her. He isn't anymore than she is. Harry hasn't threatened to stop speaking to her, she has. That's the difference. I hope you understand that the experiences Harry is going through aren't making an immediate impact, with the exception of the fact that they have convinced Harry that he is more mature. Just because I make him think it doesn't mean he's always right. He's wrong quite a bit. And so is Daphne. And so is Hermione. And so is Ginny. And so is Blaise...you get the picture? The difference that I see is that Harry will have the capability to become a leader and make informed and mature decisions when he's forced to. It isn't natural for that to happen; something needs to make it happen.

BTW, is there any psych experts out there, I'm using what I learned in an intro course I took this summer, so my knowledge is somewhat limited.

Another thing is that Ron is more of an inconvenient annoyance right now than any kind of equal to Harry, and I say that in an objective fashion. Draco is an amateur compared to Greengrass or not. Harry isn't scared of either one of them. But Hogwarts isn't a place where you can fight anyone that annoys you. There is one person Harry 'fears' at this point, and it's Sirius Black. The other thing is that Ron is too stubborn to scare easily. He's a Gryffindor to a fault. At this point, he doesn't know what is best for him. He's very impressionable.

McGonagall isn't senile, nor is she an idiot. She doesn't like Slytherins. Most people that knew the 70s Slytherins, nearly all of whom became Death Eaters or supporters of Voldemort, don't like Slytherins. So she's quite biased, but so is everyone else.

There are limitations to smashing half a year into one chapter, so if I seemed to breeze over things, that's why. I think I got everything important.

Again, Luna is as much a mystery to me as she is to you. I've got an idea where I'm going to take her, but not a definite plan. Also keep in mind that it's very easy to appear to know more than you actually do. By saying a few things to get Harry off balance, it's easier to make herself appear omniscient. She isn't.

As for this other story, it's a Star Wars AU that's been bouncing around my head for a while. Who knows where it will go. This story is still my no. 1 priority.

And I'm having trouble with the ruler function, so I used 'x's'. I'll fix it when I can.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

## Chapter 17: A Call to Arms

For Hermione Jane Granger, studying for final exams began approximately five minutes after the first class on the first day of school. However, revision didn't *officially* begin until the weather started to warm in late April. It was now May, and Hermione was spending more time in the library than she did *sleeping*, despite Harry and Ginny's best efforts. Third Year, in addition to having more exams because of electives, was the first year they would actually *take* exams. First Year, they had been cancelled when Voldemort's attempt to acquire the Philosopher's Stone had been foiled. Second Year, they had been cancelled because of what had happened in the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry had been dragged along for the ride, and Hermione often demanded that they spend hours reviewing the same material over and over. Harry was pretty sure that he could now repeat the eight uses of pixie claws in his sleep. Ginny did her best to force Hermione to perform basic functions, such as *eating* and *sleeping*, but Harry was already beginning to have nightmare about what Hermione would be like when O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s were imminent.

The other thing on Harry's mind, of course, was the Prophecy that he had witnessed Trelawney give. Dumbledore had extracted Harry's memory of the event and he had floo-called Daphne to view the new prophecy with his Pensieve in order to get the exact wording. All three had been confused by the vague references, though it was their consensus that Sirius was the 'traitor.' Daphne guessed that Harry was the 'betrayed,' though Dumbledore wasn't as certain. There were several full moons that the prophecy could refer to, and 'soon' could be exact or relative, meaning that it could take place next month or next year. Daphne had simply promised to be waiting for news on the night of each full moon in case she was needed. She told Harry to be watchful, but not to be overly concerned. It was hardly reassuring. Ginny and Hermione hadn't been any less unsettled, either.

Then there was his Defense against the Dark Arts professor. Remus had backed off his earlier request for an immediate relationship with his friend's only son, and had stepped away long enough to see what Harry was really like. Rather than inviting Harry to have tea with him,

or to simply talk, he'd made himself available, spending time in the library and always ready to drop what he was doing if Harry stopped by. It had been Hermione who had finally broken the ice between them. Harry could see that his bushy-haired best friend had a lot in common with the man, and that Remus could easily relate to Hermione's experience in school and her preoccupation with studying and reading. He found himself dragged along to these impromptu meetings, which gave him and his professor a chance to interact without the awkwardness that had accompanied their earlier conversations. Hermione seemed almost oblivious to the problems he and Remus had had earlier in the year, something that struck Harry as quite odd, considering that she was normally so observant.

As the months past, Harry began to feel that his earlier impressions of his Defense professor might have been wrong. Remus was rather modest, easily embarrassed, quite open to new ideas and perfectly tolerant of Harry's different approach to life. While he tried to serve as a moderating presence, he didn't try to curb Harry's ambition, allowing him to dream of whatever he wanted. He simply advised caution, but in indirect ways. Harry wasn't completely sure of how much Remus's pledge to help him accomplish what he wanted with the power at his disposal was the *wolf* and how much was the *man* himself. Remus seemed to have altered his perspective and had finally accepted that Harry simply wasn't anything like many of his peers. Still, Harry could tell that the man wasn't completely approving of the way he thought at times. The difference was that he kept those thoughts to himself, even if it was obvious in his tone of voice and facial expression. He did *not* approve of the way that Harry had threatened some of his First Year classmates. Harry believed that if he knew what Ron and Draco had put him though, he might have thought differently.

But as Harry spent more time with Remus, he began to genuinely like the man. His honestly, his modesty, and his willingness to listen were all appealing qualities, as was his intelligence and capability for independent thought. Being a werewolf, even if his 'condition' wasn't widely known, gave him a certain perspective on prejudice that was difficult to find.

In addition, though he didn't know a tremendous amount about the subject itself, Remus knew enough to help Harry pick through the limited literature on Goblin history and find the facts. Harry still remembered what Griphook had told him, and while he had kept his promise, he knew that it would be necessary that he have at least a working knowledge of Goblin culture and history.

There was one other subject that Harry was becoming increasingly interested in. He had wanted to know for a long time what his parents had *really* been like. He had only the heavily biased and selective accounts of his other teachers, from Snape, who despised James Potter, to McGonagall, who adored him, (though quite frustrated by his lack of maturity at times.) As for Lily, while Daphne had painted a rather idyllic picture of her best friend, she rarely went into any specifics. Harry hoped that Remus might be able to give him a better idea of his parents' virtues and faults, their flaws and best qualities.

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It had been difficult for Remus Lupin to begin to see through his earlier misjudgments about Harry, to finally overcome the memories of the dozens of Slytherins that had flocked to Voldemort's side, and see that the extraordinary young man who wore James Potter's face and a Slytherin Badge wasn't at all like his Housemates. For while Harry mirrored Daphne's view of the Dark Arts, he was not a cold-hearted, manipulative, budding Dark Wizard.

That said, the differences between Harry and James were shocking. Perhaps the only similarity he *could* draw was that they were both excellent Quidditch players, and knew it, too. But while James had grown egotistical and arrogant, Harry exuded a quiet confidence that merely fed his ambition, setting his sights ever higher. Harry didn't work himself to death like Hermione Granger, his best friend. Nor did he slack off in every class but Transfiguration and do the absolute minimum as James had. Harry seemed to be constantly looking towards the future. He worked hard on things that he felt would matter in the long run, supplemented that learning with a great deal of independent research, and practiced his actual spell-work to the point of perfection, (at least, Harry claimed, to what Daphne called 'competence.')

But that wasn't to say Harry was completely superior to his father, at least in Remus's opinion. Harry was extremely bitter, especially over what he had experienced his First Year, and continued to experience from the troublesome Ron Weasley. Remus found it fascinating that Harry had befriended his archenemy's little sister when she had been Sorted into Slytherin.

Harry also possessed a great deal of anger and hatred. There was no denying he'd been through a lot, and the fact that Harry might be able to rank the death of his parents at the *bottom* of his list of most traumatic experiences was disturbing in itself. While Remus had immediately blamed Daphne, he had come to regret that snap judgement as he saw just how far she'd fallen from her school days. Harry didn't seek danger, nor was he ignorant of his own mortality. It was the complete opposite, but it didn't seem that way to an outsider. Harry had nearly died twice just *this year*, but had adopted the disturbingly calm attitude that he could only keep going, and not allow himself to be intimidated or scared. He was fearless, but not in a foolhardy way.

Perhaps *that* was what frightened him the most: Harry's acceptance that his young life might come to an end at any moment. It wasn't quite the outright fatalism of Daphne, who felt that her time was running out, that she should, by all rights, already be dead, possibly by her own wand. But it bothered Remus nonetheless. It was inescapable that her personality would leave an impression on the boy she had raised, but that didn't make it *right*.

Then there was the matter of the power he possessed, and the destiny that seemed to accompany it. Harry might think differently, but it was clear to Remus that Harry didn't comprehend that he was still a *child*. It didn't matter that he thought about and concerned himself with things that no normal child his age did, but that his preconceptions and ideas were far less reasonable and mature than he thought they were. Remus knew that Harry would, at this rate, continue to overextend himself, and get burned in the process. For all he knew about the interaction between Slytherins, it might already have happened. Repeatedly.

Remus had never heard of a person possessing such power at such an early age; even Dumbledore and Voldemort (from what sketchy reports were available) hadn't peaked until they had at least come of age, possessing above-average talent and skill, but nothing on the scale of Harry. What made it more frightening was that Harry had no idea of how to control his power, and Remus knew that Daphne could only do so much to contain it.

These were the kinds of issues that came to Remus's mind when he saw or met with Harry Potter. So it was rather shocking when Harry asked to know more about his parents.

They were in the Library, in a deserted corner hidden by countless shelves from prying eyes or listening ears. Remus was examining a few books he'd found, searching for information to supplement his lectures for the next few weeks. Harry was working on a Potions essay. That was another thing that had been quite surprising to Remus: the idea of Severus Snape giving private lessons to the son of James Potter was laughable, and yet Harry met with him at least two times a week, and they seemed to have a stable, if business-like, relationship. That fact provided a small measure of comfort to Remus; while he acknowledged that he had misjudged Snape's character, believing the exaggerations of Sirius and James, he still didn't trust the man any farther than he could throw him. For all the talk of redemption, the man still had the Dark Mark burned into his left forearm. And Daphne *hated* him, for reasons that were entirely lost on Remus.

Remus had just written down the page number of an interesting passage on Sirens when Harry's voice, low and somewhat reluctant, shook him out of his thoughts. "Remus, what was my father *really* like?"

Remus looked up in surprise. Harry's eyes met his, an anxious curiosity burning behind their emerald green. Slowly, he said, "I'd be happy to tell you some stories. What would you like to know?"

Harry blinked. "Well...I've heard a lot about him, all of it heavily biased."

Remus nodded. *That's an understatement*, he thought. "Go on."

Harry shrugged. "You were his friend, you spent a lot of time with him," he said. "I was hoping that you might be able to tell me more about him...and my mother."

This time, Remus blinked. *Why would Harry be asking about Lily? Surely Daphne's told him everything there is to know...*

And then, he realized that he was completely wrong. Daphne sought to bury her past, to hide from it. Remus had noticed once when Harry had mentioned Lily, Daphne had suddenly refused to meet his eyes. *Lily's eyes...*

"I can try," he offered, trying not to get choked up. He *needed* to make Harry understand that there was more to his father than the arrogant, pompous bully that Severus preferred to remember. But he also knew that he had to be *completely* honest. If he presented a flawless, idyllic James, Harry would become disgusted with him.

"James was a...privileged child," Remus began. When no snort of derision from Harry followed, he continued, "he was an only child, and his parents, who were quite wealthy, as you know, had him fairly late in life. He never really learned much responsibility or self-discipline, and his parents let him do almost anything, within reason, of course. I mean, his parents taught him good values, but...well, he became a bit big-headed."

Harry's gaze didn't change. It was flat, level. He seemed almost uninterested in what Remus was saying, but the werewolf knew better. Harry was trying to absorb everything he was saying without allowing his emotions and biases to get in the way. He was listening as he might to a lecture by McGonagall about the difficulties of Conjuring.

Remus continued. "He was a nice boy, Harry; he befriended me, invited me to join him and his friends, without ever having met me before. And believe me, Harry, the full moon had been just a few days earlier; I wasn't exactly an impressive physical specimen."

Again, Harry was silent. Remus was grateful for that. "I thought at the time he might just be taking pity on me, and perhaps he was. But as I

spent time with him, it was clear that he valued my opinions. He even defended my...ah, *study habits* to...his friend-"

"Just say his *name*, Remus," Harry interrupted. "I know who you are referring to."

Remus stared at him. "I should have guessed," he admitted. "If Daphne told you what *I* was, there is no doubt she also told you that Sirius was more than just a traitor."

Harry nodded.

Remus sighed. "It's very *difficult* to do what you are asking me to do, Harry. I almost feel like I need to find reasons for you to like him while at the same time trying to be honest. He wasn't *perfect*, Harry, *no one is*. But when the war came, there was no one else...*including* Daphne, that I would rather have at my side. He would do *anything* for those he cared about. He was brave, he was intelligent, and once he had a clear focus, he was a formidable foe and an excellent leader. You *can't* judge someone solely on what they were like as a teenager, Harry."

Harry seemed to consider this, then nodded. "Thank you," he said quietly.

Remus ran a tired hand over his face. "You wanted me to tell you about your mother as well?" he asked.

Harry frowned. "You don't sound all that enthusiastic about it," he pointed out.

Remus shrugged. "I cared for both of your parents, Harry, and it's difficult to think about them sometimes. I'll do it for you, if you want me to."

Harry nodded slowly. "Thank you."

Talking about Harry's mother was considerably easier than discussing his father. Remus had known Lily well, and while she certainly had her faults, in school she was a much more likable person than James. Lily had been intelligent and driven, almost to a

fault, much like Harry's best friend, Hermione. Remus supposed that it made sense, considering that both were Muggleborns and coming from families with no previous history of magical offspring. They were forced to compete with children that had known about magic since the time they could talk. It was ironic, too, Remus thought, that it had been *Daphne* who, despite the fact she had been groomed as her family's Magical Heir since birth, had been a moderating influence. As an adolescent, Daphne had possessed a self-confidence that allowed her to appear relaxed in her classes and social interaction. She also had a burning drive to succeed inside of her, but it hadn't been readily apparent.

Lily, Remus told her son, had always been a bit insecure, despite the fact that she was rather attractive. She wasn't vain, just more interested in her marks than her appearance. She was very stubborn and somewhat ambitious, to an extent that was not very common among the Gryffindors. She spent a lot of time with her teachers, not because she was trying to improve her grades, but because she wanted to learn more. Remus also had to admit that Lily felt she had a lot to prove, and appreciated the reassurances her professors would give her. She was quite proud of being inducted into Horus Slughorn's "Slug Club," despite the fact that it was obvious their Potions professor kept his top pupils and his students with connections around for his own ego-gratification.

Harry hadn't seemed surprised when Remus had told him about the hatred Lily had initially held towards James. Remus had no way of knowing, but the way that Lily also seemed *disappointed* in James made him suspect that even back then, Lily felt an attraction to the man she would eventually marry. And this was several years before she actually accepted James's offer to go out on a date.

It took several meetings over a week to explain everything he could about Harry's parents, but Harry seemed eager to learn as much as possible; at least, that was what Remus suspected, as Harry rarely showed his eagerness or excitement in his facial expressions. Still, he didn't think Harry would keep coming back if he truly wasn't interested.

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Harry had to lean against the wall to avoid falling as he shook with laughter. Ginny was in a similar state, already turning red from a lack of air. After a few moments, Harry coughed and Ginny cleared her throat. They took one look at each other and burst into laughter all over again. Harry leaned forward, bracing himself with his Firebolt. They had just witnessed perhaps the most embarrassing hour in Draco Malfoy's life.

"I still...can't believe that!" Harry gasped. "Your brothers...are bloody geniuses!"

Ginny grinned widely. "I haven't been that fond of them this year. But I might have to chase them down and congratulate the two prats!"

Harry laughed again. He wished Hermione had been there to see it, because she disliked Malfoy so much, but she had been forced into joining the other students in going to Hogsmeade by her two best friends. Hermione's preoccupation with preparing for her exams was slipping into an obsession, evidenced by the dark circles under her eyes each morning. Though she was undoubtedly buried under a pile of books in the newly built Flourish and Blotts bookstore, it was better than being curled up in a chair, in a dark corner of the library, with a hundred kilos of books on her lap. Considering that Hermione wasn't the only student that had taken to inhabiting the library before moving to their common rooms and falling asleep among their textbooks, Harry found it strange that there hadn't been a bookstore in Hogsmeade before.

Still, at this moment, his concerns for his best friend's sanity weren't at the front of his mind. Instead, he focused on the mental image of Draco Malfoy's face as he went from ridiculing Harry's choice to use his veteran Nimbus instead of his new Firebolt to fuming and cursing angrily as he tried to manage his malfunctioning Nimbus 2001. It had been obvious to the onlookers that the broom had been jinxed, quite a feat in and of itself.

The entire episode had begun with a Serpent Quidditch Practice set, inexplicably, for the same time as the last Hogsmeade visit of the year. It hadn't mattered to Harry or Ginny, neither of whom were allowed to go, but it irritated everyone else. It was something that

Flint would do if he were in a bad mood; it wasn't characteristic of Pucey at all. Harry had come in with his Nimbus underneath his arm, and Pucey had immediately demanded to know where his Firebolt was, despite the fact that a few months earlier he'd proved how his skill at handling the familiar broom overcame the raw speed and power advantages that the newer broom enjoyed. Malfoy had been all over him for it, though his puns weren't particularly amusing to anyone outside of his lackeys, Crabbe and Goyle. And they would laugh at *anything*.

Harry had more or less tuned it out by the time that Pucey had finished explaining the strategies they were going to practice that day, several of which were hybrids of the ridiculously complex maneuvers that Flint favored. Still, they mostly applied only to the Chasers and the Beaters, so it wasn't really his problem. Ginny seemed unconcerned with anything except proving that she could play with the older students on the team.

Once they had taken to the air, Draco's troubles had begun.

It had become apparent early that something was wrong. As the time ticked away, Draco's broom became more and more difficult, and to Harry, it appeared as if the broom was trying to move in the exact opposite direction that Malfoy was steering it in. However, instead of simply going to ground and figuring out what was wrong, Malfoy stubbornly insisted on continuing with the practice. Consumed by his duties as captain, Pucey hadn't noticed, except to chastise Malfoy for his poor flying. Finally, Malfoy had started roughly jerking the broom in the direction he wanted it to go in...with disastrous results.

Either Fred and George had gotten lucky, or they had deliberately planned the prank so that Malfoy would be merely humiliated, not physically harmed. Because as the broom began to corkscrew, dive unpredictably, and cause Draco to cling to the handle for dear life, it had appeared to Harry that the broom was actually *preventing* Malfoy from falling off at dangerous attitudes. Instead, when the broom was close enough to the ground, Malfoy would continuously be hurled into two different puddles of mud. Amazingly, he *continued* to attempt to master his disobedient Nimbus, and it *continued* to fling him all over the pitch. Pucey's attempt to *Stun* the broom had resulted in him

being flung to the ground by the deflection and knocked unconscious by his own spell. Harry had needed to land by this point to avoid falling himself. Ginny was already on the ground, clinging to Anne Grunitch.

The broom had finally given up and fallen softly towards the ground, stopping to hover normally a foot above the pitch. Malfoy, covered in grime, mud dripping from his silver-blonde hair, his face bright red in embarrassment, had approached it as one might approach a bomb. Tentatively, he'd placed a hand on it, and it had *again* flung him into a mud puddle. This time, it was accompanied by a series of insults, unmistakably the voice of the Twins. Pucey had belatedly cancelled practice, and Harry and Ginny had gone to change. They'd taken one look at each other and had been breaking into spontaneous fits of laughter ever since.

Harry grinned back at her. "I think I'll have to come with you. I need to thank them personally for bringing Malfoy down a few notches. I also need to find out how they managed not only to jinx the broom, but to create such an incredible combination."

"I doubt they'll tell you *that*," she told him. "You're still a Slytherin, and they just don't trust them by rule." Her voice contained more than a tinge of hurt. "I suppose they trust me because I'm family, though they seem to leave me out of things at times."

"They'll get over it," Harry assured her, though he wasn't sure he believed it. "Still, I think I know what spells they used: a Bucking Jinx, a Reverse Charm, a Seeking Spell, and some spell that produced their voices. What I want to know is how they cast them *simultaneously*. That's quite a feat."

"Mum wants them to do something productive with all their talent and brains, but all they seem interested in is pulling pranks."

"At least most of them are harmless," Harry said under his breath, thinking of his father. Despite Remus's efforts, he still wasn't exactly thrilled with James's behavior during school.

"What?" Ginny asked.

"Nothing," Harry told her. He was annoyed with himself for running the jovial mood with his own problems. "They *would* be great at running Zonko's, or even starting a competitor. There *is* gold to be made in that line of work."

Ginny nodded, but grimaced. "Tell that to Mum. She thinks they are throwing it all away. She always talks about Percy and Bill, and to a lesser extent Charlie, who all had better marks and probably aren't as talented. At least...well, I don't know, Bill *is* pretty powerful, I think. But it's like they combine two people's worth of magic into one person, and they complement each other."

Harry nodded. "I suspect it's something like that. Identical magical twins are very rare, and not much is known about them. They always tend to be averse to describing how their relationship affects their magical ability."

Ginny nodded thoughtfully. "It's really weird to think about that...how powerful they could be, I mean. I know they aren't as powerful as *you* will be, but it's still *strange*...I wonder if they know..."

"I'm pretty sure they do, or at least, they possess a confidence that they can't entirely explain. Does it ever seem like they regret what they've decided to do with their lives at all?" Harry asked her.

Ginny frowned at him. "Of course they don't. At least, I've never seen any indication that they do. Mum thinks they are just being naïve and don't understand how much they are wasting their education. But I don't think Fred and George would be that stupid."

"I doubt it, also," Harry agreed. "But it's something interesting to think about." He paused, wondering if he should ask the question. "How has your family been treating you? Are they over your Sorting yet?"

Ginny sighed. "Sometimes I think they've accepted who I am...but other times..." she sniffled slightly, and Harry felt guilty for bringing it up. *Care to damper the mood any more, Potter? She's gone from laughing hysterically to on the verge of breaking down in tears.*

Harry raised his hands. "I'm sorry; I should have realized it would be tough for you to talk about. You don't need to. I'm sorry I asked."

Ginny shook her head. "Don't apologize, you were just being curious. And I *want* to tell you this...but not here. I don't want just anyone to hear this."

"Let's go to the Room, then," Harry suggested. "We'll have privacy there. We can deal with Hermione's suicidal study habits later."

Ginny smiled slightly. "I bet you that she comes back with her weight in books slung over her shoulder."

Harry raised his hands. "I'm not taking *that* bet. I'm guaranteed to lose." Without really thinking about it, he put a comforting arm around his much smaller friend's shoulders. She glanced up at him briefly in surprise, but said nothing. They reached the Seventh Floor without incident, and when they opened the door, the Room was unoccupied. It had also provided a pair of green armchairs, a couch, and a table with two cups of tea. Harry swore the Room was getting to 'know' him, predicting exactly what he wanted without him needing to think about it. The idea of what he wanted was all that was required.

They sat down on the couch and took sips of their tea, and Ginny began speaking. "It's very odd, the way they behave around me. We've always been such a close family, and so they seem to feel the need to trust me at all times...well, unless I could possibly rat them out to Mum; but I haven't done *that* for a while. Probably should have thought about what that said about me."

Harry snorted. "I'm not sure using the authority of your mother to defend yourself against your brothers in a legitimate reason to be Sorted into Slytherin."

Ginny shrugged. "I guess I've always been a bit sneaky and underhanded..."

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head. "You're thinking like a *Gryffindor*."

Ginny looked up at him. "What?"

Harry paused, trying to find the words he needed to use. "You've allowed the resentment that your brothers felt about you being Sorted

in Slytherin to make you ashamed of what you are. Think about the words you are using to describe your House qualities. *Underhanded*. *Sneaky*. All decidedly *negative* adjectives, no?"

"Well, yes, but—" Ginny began to protest. Harry cut her off.

"But nothing," he said sharply. She seemed to shrink back from him, and he chastised himself. He just couldn't *stand* it when other people perpetuated the Serpent House's bad reputation. Let alone an *actual Slytherin*. "Ginny, Slytherins pride themselves in being *ambitious*. And *cunning*. And *resourceful*. Do any of *those* sound like bad things?"

Ginny hesitated. "To an extent, being ambitious *can* be a flaw."

"Only if you're *me*," Harry grumbled under his breath. "I suppose it can be, if you take it past a reasonable level. But normally, ambitious people are the ones that end up in charge of the Wizarding World. They're the most driven, the ones most willing to work hard and do whatever is necessary to get to the top. They are usually the most successful. Riddle once told me that in war, Gryffindors are the foot soldiers, Hufflepuffs are the medics, Ravenclaws are the battle commanders, and Slytherins are the politicians who put all of them there in the first place."

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "Is *he* the best person to trust on this matter?"

Harry closed his eyes. He should have thought of that. "It doesn't change anything," he insisted. "Voldemort was wrong about a great number of things, but he's right about the virtues of Slytherins."

"But what happens when 'any means necessary' include illegal action?" Ginny challenged.

Harry sighed. "Ginny, like it or not, corruption is a part of politics and always has been. Politics is a game, with high stakes and cutthroat competition."

Ginny shrugged. "I suppose you're right. You still haven't proven to me that all Slytherins are better than they're reputed to be. What about the ones that joined You-Know-Who?"

"Please call him *Voldemort*, Ginny," Harry asked, exasperated. "It's a name, not the incantation for a Conjuring Charm. As for the ones you're talking about, there isn't a case for cause-and-effect; being a Slytherin doesn't make you a potential supporter of Voldemort. Daphne's husband was a Slytherin, but the difference was that Edmond was from a *Light* family. Ambition and cunning are traits that are cultivated and valued in power politics between the Pureblood families, so naturally, many of their sons and daughters will be Slytherins. There were a number of former Hogwarts' students that had already pledged their allegiance to Voldemort's cause, and they clandestinely recruited new followers. Those that joined them were already expected to do so by their families."

Ginny looked thoughtful. "I suppose that makes a lot of sense. It isn't that they supported, you-know-...er-*Voldemort*," she corrected, "because they were *Slytherins*, but because they were mostly Purebloods that believed in Voldemort's *philosophy*."

Harry nodded approvingly. "Exactly. So do you still think that Slytherins should be described as under-handed and sneaky?"

Ginny shook her head, blushing slightly. "No...I can't believe I really thought that way about *my own House*..."

"It's not really your *House*, but *yourself*, that I'm concerned about. I'm not sure how ambitious you are, though it sounds like you want to at least be as successful as Bill, who's in a *very* tough field. That takes some ambition and desire."

"I guess you're right," Ginny admitted. "I'm sorry."

"Why?" Harry asked her. "You're used to trusting the ideas and opinions of your brothers and the rest of your family. Maybe finding out that they can be wrong is a good thing."

Ginny smiled gratefully at him. "Thank you," she said quietly. "I really needed to hear that."

"No problem," Harry told her. "Let's go find Hermione and make sure she came back with the others and isn't barricaded in the bookstore."

Ginny laughed.

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With his rather well-known features concealed by a hooded cloak, Peter Pettigrew was at last free to roam the Wizarding World without using a Disillusionment Charm. But he had no intention of relaxing and imbibing at some Muggle pub for the first time in twelve years; he had left Hogwarts, faking his own death for the second time in two decades in the process, to seek out the only people he could really consider friends. And so, using Tracking Charms on innocuous notes addressed to a pair of siblings that no one had heard from since the Fall of the Dark Lord, he'd finally made his way to an innocent-looking cottage some ways outside of Sheffield.

He trudged up a beaten stone path towards the small dwelling, wondering how Amycus and Alecto Carrow would react to seeing their presumed-deceased friend for the first time in twelve-years. *Assuming they still think of me as a friend*, Peter thought glumly. He'd been forgotten before, who was to say it wouldn't happen again? His spirits were lifted as he thought of what he had to offer them. A chance to *resurrect* their Lord, to return him and *them* to their former glory. Peter didn't know *how* to do it, but somehow he *knew* it was possible. The greatest masters of the Dark Arts, his Dark Lord and Salazar Slytherin included, had devised measures to stop even *death*, to *preserve* the soul. Surely they had a way to return their disembodied essences to corporeal form?

Yes, surely such a chance would put them back into his good favor. After all, a chance to abduct *Harry Potter* was not one to be wasted.

He approached the door, withdrew the wand he'd effortlessly stolen from an unsuspecting passerby three days ago, and whispered four words, the code words for allowing entrance to a dwelling used by the Death Eaters during the First War. The door creaked open...and Peter found himself staring at the tip of a wand held in the shaking left hand of a short, slender woman with short black hair and icy blue eyes. Alecto Carrow.

Peter slowly brought his hands up and slipped back the cowl of his cloak. The eyes of the woman standing in the doorway widened in astonished recognition. “*Wormtail?*” she asked in disbelief.

“Hello Alecto,” he greeted her. “I think I owe you an explanation.”

Another voice, obviously male, shouted from beyond the darkened hall, “Allie, who is it?” Peter nearly snickered. He knew how much Alecto *loathed* the shortened form of her name. The grimace on her face paid tribute to that.

“An old friend,” she shouted back. “Come in,” she told Peter, waving him inside with her free hand, still sounding a bit stunned. Her wand, gripped in her left hand, remained trained on his chest. Peter graciously accepted her offer, and stepped inside. As soon as he closed the door, the many candles that provided illumination suddenly lit, and the hallway was filled with bright light. Peter saw that the home was designed so as to give the Carrows a chance to keep unwanted intruders...or Aurors...out of the main part of the house until they had a chance to rally a defense.

Alecto, her wand still trained on Pettigrew, led him through a thick wooden door into a room that appeared to serve as a kitchen and dining room. Sitting on the opposite end of a battered oak table was a squat man with thinning brown hair and scarred features permanently twisted into a suspicious scowl: Amycus, Alecto’s elder brother.

The man stood as Peter entered, then sat back down as he realized who he was looking at. “Well, of all the people who might decide to drop in...aren’t you supposed to be *dead*? ”

“Isn’t Black supposed to be a traitor?” Peter asked in return. Something resembling a smile came to Amycus’s scarred face.

“I don’t believe it! *Peter?*”

“In the flesh,” the visitor replied. “Though I’ve spent a lot more time as a rodent than I have as a man.”

"I imagine," Amycus agreed. "Must be a difficult thing, pretending to be dead. Kind of limits how many people can see your true form. Limits it to no one."

"Thanks to your help, I've at least been able to walk around, even if I was invisible," Peter said. "But I've come with news."

Amycus held up a hand. "If it's of the variety that I think it is, then there is someone else that should hear it. We have a houseguest."

As if on cue, a huge, hulking mass of a man appeared in a side door. As he emerged into the light, Peter felt his blood freeze. The man...if he could be called *that*...had sharply angled features, a snout-like face, short, steel-grey hair, amber eyes, and teeth so sharp that they glistened in the candlelight, as if polished. The complete opposite of the only other werewolf that Peter had ever known. One hated his condition, the other lived for it. One did all he could to keep others safe, the other did everything he could to ensure he caused harm. One was the most wanted werewolf in three generations, the other told only close friends of his nature. The personalities of Remus Lupin and this *man*, both bitten at a young age, were as different as any two people, werewolves or not, could possibly be.

And Peter was *terrified* by the man who considered his greatest accomplishment to be the subject of stories that parents told their children to frighten them.

And Fenrir Greyback *knew* it.

"Salutations, my dear fellow Death Eater. How have the years been treating you? Not very well I see," he growled in response to his own question.

"I'm fine, Fenrir," Peter said, fighting the quavering in his voice. "I've got news that might interest you...all of you."

"You should know by now that I have little interest in aiding your Dark Lord," he retorted sharply. Peter shivered. "The only thing I have interest in," he continued, almost casually, picking at his teeth with a long, yellowing fingernail, "is fresh blood. Specifically, the blood of a young witch or wizard powerful enough to satisfy my hunger. Our

clans are scattered, but they are not decimated. We have no need of new members.”

“How about Harry Potter?” Peter offered. This time, Greyback looked genuinely shocked. Alecto and Amycus looked flabbergasted.

“W-w-what?” Alecto asked softly.

Peter paused. He’d never been a leader, but there was a first time for everything. Now he had the chance to live up to the expectations that his mother had always hoped he would reach. “Our Lord is close to returning, we all *feel* it,” he said, tapping the inside of his left forearm for emphasis. “We can immediately put ourselves on his good side if we help facilitate his return. I believe that I know where to find him.”

“Where?” Amycus demanded.

Peter swallowed. He’d overheard this information in a conversation between Albus Dumbledore, in his sleep wear no less, and his former Head of House, Minerva McGonagall. “He’s somewhere in the Dark Forests of Romania. He’s been regaining his strength since his defeat in his quest for the Philosopher’s Stone. He is helpless and weak. We have a chance to become his most trusted servants, and we have a duty to do so. Is *this* what you envisioned when you took the Mark?” he asked, waving his hand around the dingy room. “Are you content to live out your lives like this, hiding from the Ministry?”

Pettigrew’s words hit home and Amycus nodded. “I begin to see your point, Peter. But how will we abduct Potter? He’s at Hogwarts, under the watchful eye of Albus Dumbledore, not to mention the Grey Maiden, who I, for one, never intend to come up against.”

“Black is hiding out in the Forbidden Forest, trying b to kidnap Potter for his own reasons, not that I know what they are,” Peter added hastily. “There’s also one other thing that I’ve discovered.”

He paused, and Greyback became impatient. “Get on with it,” he growled.

“I’ve...been privileged to be present at the delivering of another Prophecy,” Peter began. “From the same source,” he added.

Alecto and Amycus looked at each other, then at Peter. "And?" Alecto asked.

"It predicted that the 'Dark One,' the 'Traitor,' and the 'Betrayed' would meet on the night of a full moon, and seemed to imply that the Resurrection of our Lord would shortly follow," Peter said. He hadn't believed his luck when he'd run to investigate the source of the sound of shattering glass, and witnessed Sybil Trelawney delivering a Prophecy to a stunned Harry Potter. He'd lingered just long enough to get the full text before fleeing, hoping to avoid discovery. He'd thought that Potter had looked in his direction as he ran, but he figured that he was just being paranoid.

"Who are they people that are referred to?" Alecto asked suspiciously.

Peter shrugged. "I'm going to assume that the 'Traitor' is me, and that the 'Betrayed' is Sir-*Black*," he amended. "As for the 'Dark One'? My gold is on Dressler."

Amycus shut his eyes. "Peter, I will *NOT* face that woman again. I barely survived my first encounter. Our leader, Evan Rosier, wasn't as fortunate."

Peter knew that Amycus was referring to the now infamous raid on the home of Daphne and Edmond Dressler, ordered by the Dark Lord to eliminate two of his most dangerous opponents. They had killed the Grey Maiden's husband, but she had been enraged, and had loosed a hail of deadly magic that had transformed the raiding party into helpless targets. Rosier's body has been *shredded*, and a couple of rookie Death Eaters had also died in the initial barrage. Another had perished in the running battle that followed. Only Amycus, Alecto, Thomas Avery, and Antonin Dolohov survived, and based upon the fate of the McCourns, it was likely that Daphne had sworn a Vow of Vengeance against all four of them. As Roland and Helga bore witness, she kept her promises. "Think of the reward, Amycus. Think of how our Lord will be indebted to us."

Amycus appeared deep in thought, then, to Peter's relief, he nodded. "Alright, I'll risk it." He looked at his sister. She nodded grimly.

Peter turned a hopeful gaze to Fenrir. The werewolf grinned viciously. “I’ll do it...and take a large chunk of flesh out of the Half-Blood in the process. I doubt he’ll be around long enough for Voldemort to care that he isn’t exactly *human*.”

Peter shivered. He actually pitied Potter. “Alright, all you need to do is be ready to Apparate to the edge of the Hogwarts Wards. I’ll alert you with a black owl. When it arrives, go there and wait for me. I’m going to wait for Black to make a grab at Potter first. Hopefully, we can catch him in the confusion. Black will flee, they’ll assume that he took Potter, and we can slip away unseen.”

“Sounds like a risky plan,” Amycus admitted. “But we don’t have a choice. We must act.”

Peter bowed to them. “Thank you,” he said. “You won’t regret this.”

“I hope not, Wormtail,” Fenrir growled. “Because if it fails, I might just forget that I consider rats *indigestible*.”

“It’ll work,” Peter assured him.

He only wished that he believed it himself.

---

Daphne knew that she had to be perfectly precise in her measurements and timing if this potion was going to work. For the umpteenth time since beginning this project, she wished Lily was at her side. Charms and Potions had been the only subjects that her best friend had bested her in. And the Potion she was attempting to brew now made the Wolfsbane Potion look simply by comparison. She hadn’t slept for two days.

She’d originally found a mention of the *Draught of Prediction* four years ago, in a battered old Divination text she had in the Dressler Family Library. Now, with her ward’s life on the line, she had searched until she found the Potion, and then searched for the ingredients and directions. She’d never seen a potion so complicated. The number of ingredients and their scarcity had initially convinced her that she couldn’t do it, but a nightmare of Harry’s lifeless eyes had changed her mind.

She checked the directions and slowly stirred the draught four times, then paused for thirty seconds and vigorously stirred clockwise for ten rotations. She waited exactly two minutes, and then added the final ingredient: a genuine vampire fang. She had spent a fortune in Knockturn Alley purchasing most of the ingredients, but her fortune was almost limitless, and she would spare no expense for Harry.

Daphne carefully placed the levitated vampire fang, which was also the exact length and weight specified by the book, in the very center of the bubbling cauldron, then painstakingly guided it down towards the bottom. Any flinch or improper movement, and all her work would be ruined. She maintained her focus, and felt her hold on the fang vanish as it dissolved perfectly into potion. Now she traced her finger down onto the last instruction on the page.

*Once the Fang of the Flesh-Eater hath dissolved, stir gently against the sun by five revolutions.*

Then...

*Await thy fate.*

She stirred slowly and carefully five times, making sure that none of the potion escaped the cauldron. The stirring rod she used was Impervious to any liquid, and thus did not damage the delicate balance of the Draught of Prediction.

Daphne waited. She did not have to wait long. There was a chime from her family's grandfather clock as midnight came and went.

A flash of scarlet light came from within the now transparent mixture, and Daphne blinked. Suddenly, she was assaulted by waves of distorted sounds and stretched images. She took it in, feeling a strange, perverse satisfaction as she realized that she had been right. *And my end will serve a higher purpose, one that is far beyond my own power and ability*, she thought calmly.

But she also felt a tsunami of dread crash into her as she realized she hadn't seen Harry in but one of the scenes.

She knew what that meant. The balanced scale of Fate would decide whether Harry would live or die. And now, she knew *when* that would happen. Her suffering, her endurance of physical and mental agony over the past 50 hours from her sacrifice of blood and magic had been *worth it*.

And she would be there to swing the balance back in Harry's favor...or she would die trying...

---

Sirius sat on the battered bed on the first floor of the Shrieking Shack, his shoulders hunched, staring down at the floor. He was starting to wonder if he even had a chance to save Harry. He'd made a mistake by compromising his only access the dungeons, and he knew that Remus, hoping to protect Harry, would have given Dumbledore the locations of all of the other secret passages into the school. The old wizard was sharp, and he had undoubtedly placed Detection Wards at the entrances and exits.

In short, Sirius had no shot of getting into the castle itself. And it didn't seem like he had any way of getting Harry alone. He knew he couldn't just *abduct* the boy, not without making Harry understand how badly they had all been fooled. He wished he knew where Peter was, wished he could rip his old friend's throat out or substitute the rat animagus for all the other rodents he'd been forced to eat since he had stopped quickly at 12 Grimmauld Place and eaten some moldy biscuits. Sadly, the Black Family's House Elf, Kreacher, had still been alive, and more crazed than ever. Then there had been his mother's portrait, which had accurately reflected her inner ugliness as her appearance never had in life...

Frustrated by the memories and his failure, he lashed out, driving his fist into the headboard of the bed. The wood gave but didn't break, and all Sirius had for his trouble was a painful throbbing in his right hand. He cursed softly. *I can't leave*, he told himself. *I can't just give up. What would James say if he knew I'd abandoned his son to that Dark Witch...or whatever I ought to call her?*

He sighed. He supposed he really shouldn't blame Daphne for turning out the way she did...or insisting that she be given custody of Lily's

son. And there was no doubt that she had tried to the best of her ability to keep him safe...but what she judged *safe* and *to the best of her ability* were the reasons that Sirius had weathered the harsh winter of Scotland, forced to survive outside in the Forest once a month when Remus would come to use the derelict house as a prison to hide himself. Remus hadn't actually shown up earlier in the year, and Sirius wondered if he'd managed to find a way to control his Wolf. But in late November, a haggard Remus had plodded in just as Sirius had slipped out through a concealed hole in the foundation of the boarded up house. The Marauders had discovered it and widened it so that they would have an alternate means of escape should the tunnel from the Whomping Willow be impassable.

*No!* he declared, thumping his still-sore hand against the much softer mattress of the bed. He would *not* give up. He would *not* make his escape from Azkaban count for nothing. "But what can I *do*?" he rasped to the deserted house.

There was a scratching noise from somewhere to the left of him. A familiar animal emerged from underneath the worn gray carpet that concealed the second entrance to the Shrieking Shack. Sirius smiled as Crookshanks came into full view. The kneazle-mix, by far the most intelligent animal he'd ever encountered, had been his constant companion since he'd met him near the edge of the forest. Crookshanks, who belonged to some Gryffindor girl named 'Hermione Jane Granger,' based on the nametag hanging from his collar, would visit him from time-to-time, and even seemed to understand English.

Sirius frowned as he noticed something in the cat's mouth: a thin piece of folded parchment. "Lemme see that," he said to the cat, pointing at the animal's cargo. Crookshanks leapt onto the bed and dropped the parchment in Sirius's lap.

Sirius suddenly had a flash of recognition, but shook his head. "It *can't* be," he said. "All those years in Azkaban have driven you loony, Sirius. There is *no* way that this is the Marauder's Map."

As if determined to prove him wrong, Crookshanks nudged the parchment with his nose, purring loudly. Then he bit Sirius in the arm.

“OWW!” he cried, cursing. “Alright you bloody animal, I’ll look at it!”

He carefully unfolded the parchment. It *couldn’t* be...

Fingers trembling, Sirius reached for his wand. “*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.*”

Sirius’s jaw dropped as the lines of the Marauder’s Map began to fill in. Seconds later, he was staring in disbelief at the heading of the Map.

*Mssrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs are pleased to present:*

### **THE MARAUDER’S MAP.**

Still unable to believe what he was seeing, Sirius immediately began searching the map for Harry. He found him, after a brief search, in the Library, next to a pair of dots labeled *Hermione Granger* and *Ginny Weasley*.

*Wait a minute...Granger?*

His gaze flew to Crookshanks. “Your mistress didn’t by any chance *tell* you to find me?” he asked, pointing at the cat’s collar. Amazingly, the creature shook its head in a negative.

“You’re the *brightest bloody* cat in the *world*, did you know *that*?” he said in awe.

Crookshanks merely purred louder.

---

It had begun innocently enough.

*Harry,*

*I hope you’re not busy tonight, because I got something to show you that I think you’ll really be interested in. It’s kind of private, so it’d be nice if you came alone.*

*Hagrid*

The letter had been short, pleasant, and to-the-point, just like Hagrid. The hand writing had been messy and awkward; the letters smudged at times...just like Hagrid. The message had been delivered by a plain barn owl that Harry knew he'd seen before, in this exact capacity...*just like Hagrid*. The signature had been Hagrid's. There was no question, no matter how much Harry analyzed the letter, that it had been written by one Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of the Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

So why was Harry so anxious as he crossed the grounds towards the covered bridge leading to Hagrid's hut? That question he couldn't answer. All he knew was that his wand was already clutched in his right hand, and he was ready to hurl a Blasting Curse at the slightest sign of trouble. As he walked towards the bridge, he passed near the edge of the forest, and spared a glance at it. He felt guilty for a moment insisting that Ginny and Hermione stay behind. But what Remus had told him about his parents had impacted him in a way that he simply hadn't expected. He thought of them as actual people, instead of just names and memories. He was even starting to wish he'd gotten a chance to know them, that no matter how good Daphne had been to him, there was no substitute to growing up with a loving mother and father.

And he suspected that Hagrid wanted to tell him something about Lily or James. Perhaps Remus had mentioned that Harry wasn't as indifferent towards his mother or resentful towards his father anymore. It sounded quite realistic. And if he was right, he didn't *want* to share this experience with *anyone*. They were *his* parents, and no one else could say that. It was a strange thought, but to Harry, it was something he just *felt*. He didn't want to think about it.

Though for a moment he was lost in his thoughts, he felt the tingling of unfamiliar magic wash over him. And he heard the sharp crack of a broken twig that had been crushed underfoot.

He spun around, eyes searching for an attacker. It didn't take long. Standing there, his hair and clothing ragged and filthy, his eyes lit with a delirious gleam, and a wand gripped in his right hand, was Sirius Black.

“*You!*” Harry hissed angrily, realizing that he’d been tricked.

Sirius stared back at him. “Yes, Harry, it’s me. But I don’t want to hurt you. I just want to talk!” he cried desperately. “C’mon Harry, there’s no need for this. I’ll put my wand away, you’ll put your wand away, and we’ll talk. There’s no need for anyone to get hurt.”

Harry just aimed his wand between his Godfather’s eyes. “You *can’t* think I’m *that* stupid, Black. *Caecus!*”

Sirius ducked to avoid the Blinding Curse and dropped into a rough imitation of a dueling stance. He was obviously a bit out of practice, and hadn’t been expecting a fight. Still, he persisted in trying to convince Harry. “We don’t *need* to do this, Harry. I just want a chance to *explain* myself.”

Adrenaline flooded through Harry’s veins, providing fuel for the firestorm of rage that burned within him. “*Abrumpo!*” he spat. He felt his magic pounding at its barriers, but he contained it. It was a weapon that he might need later. Right now, Black seemed unwilling to battle, like the traitorous coward that he was. Harry had the advantage.

Black threw up a shield and blocked the Slicing Curse. “Using Dark Arts already, Harry? Have you ever paused and wondered what your parents might think of that?”

Harry hurled a pair of Striking Curses in response, one of which Sirius blocked, and dodging the other. Still, he refused to take the offensive. “I might, Black,” Harry ground out, “had you not *taken* them from me.” He punctuated this statement with a vicious Bludgeoning Curse, a spell he’d learned from Daphne during Christmas Break.

Sirius blocked in but was still knocked backwards by the concussion, losing his balance and hitting the ground. He moved quickly to avoid a Slicing Curse that carved a groove in the dirt where his head had been. He finally retaliated, firing a Stunning Spell that Harry easily batted aside. “Is that the best that you’ve got, Black? Weren’t you a dueling champion at some point?”

"I'm not going to hurt you, Harry. I couldn't live with myself if I did," he said softly. "But for James and Lily's sake, Harry *look at yourself!* You're a *Slytherin!* You're using illegal curses at the age of *thirteen!*"

"You should be honored, Sirius," Harry retorted, cursing the man for his tremendous acting ability. He was so *convincing. No small wonder he was able to deceive the entire Order.* "I've never used these in action before."

"*Honored* is not the way I'd put it, Harry," Black responded, firing another Stunning Spell. "Please, just give me a chance. I'm not asking for *anything* except that!"

"*You should have shown your true colors when you had the chance,*" Harry hissed back. Then he let his magic go, and it felt begin to seep through the holes in Daphne's barriers. The barriers broke, and his magic flooded through him. He wasn't even firing spells anymore. Bursts of pure magical energy lanced from his wand, blasting small craters in the ground. The euphoria of power consumed him, and he laughed.

He let up his assault, and Sirius slowly got to his feet. Suddenly, something occurred to Harry. "Why hasn't anyone seen us yet?" he demanded.

"Because I cast an Obscuring Charm," Sirius replied. "One that I'm pretty sure you don't know how to counter." Harry cursed inwardly; Black was right.

As he leveled his wand at his Godfather, there was a blur of motion to his right, and something flew at his face. He reflexively raised his left arm, fending off the attack, though several small, sharp claws raked across his skin. He tracked the motion of the animal, which he realized with a jolt was Hermione's cat, Crookshanks. Without thinking, he hurled a super-charged Blasting Curse at the place where the creature had just landed. Crookshanks barely escaped the blast, but Harry's concentration was distracted long enough for Sirius to levitate a rock and send it crashing into Harry's upper back. Harry fell forward, landing on his hands and knees, his wand slipping from his grasp. He looked up and saw the red glare of Sirius's Stunning Spell envelop him, and everything went black.

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Sirius crawled over to his unconscious Godson, still in awe of the power that Harry had wielded. He reached out and felt for Harry's pulse. It was strong.

He still felt terrible. Despite his best intentions, he'd still caused Harry pain. He looked around for Crookshanks, who might be the only reason he was still alive. The cat walked over to Harry's body, prodding his face with his nose. Sirius reached out a dirty hand and petted the creature, dragging his hand through Crookshanks' long fur. "Thanks mate," he said.

Sirius reached inside his tattered robes and withdrew something that resembled a necklace with a large black pendant. It was, in fact, a magical restraint, something that was highly illegal. He'd hoped it wouldn't be necessary, but it appeared that his father's old possession would be invaluable. He drew it around Harry's neck and closed the clasp. Then, he got to his feet, bent, picked up his godson and cradled him gently in his arms, and set off for the Whomping Willow. He had about four hours before the moon rose and he'd have to vacate the place as Remus arrived. He'd placed a detection charm at the entrance to the passage, so he would know if his old friend arrived early.

Crookshanks hurried forward, dodging the flailing branches, and touched the knot at the base of the tree, freezing it. Sirius slowly descended down into the tunnel beneath the roots, carrying Harry with him.

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A/N: This was one of my favorite chapters, all three books included. It was fun to write, addressed several different subplots, and gave me a chance to write Daphne at her most fanatical, which is always fun. So is writing Sirius when he's at his most desperate. Peter is just as interesting, as I've never been satisfied with the "spineless coward" stereotype of that character. It's too one-dimensional. I hoped you liked Alecto, Amycus, and Fenrir.

By my standards, that interaction between Harry and Ginny was *almost* fluff. Of course, being me, I had to add a touch of angst to the

conversation, just to avoid a scene where nothing mildly distressing occurs. I'm hoping what I had happen to Draco will actually be considered humorous. I'm not making him a buffoon, by the way, although he's one of the most immature Slytherins in his year. On that note, Greengrass and Nott are the exception, not the rule. Not all Slytherins are extremely cultured and mature. A lot of them, say, Flint, for example, aren't nearly that bright. There are stupid and intelligent people in each house.

So the story is rapidly moving towards an explosive conclusion. The next chapter will be interesting, and I'll be experimenting with different PoVs in a rather chaotic fashion. We'll see if it works.

I hope all the events in that chapter were reasonable. I do my best to provide adequate background to explain everything I can.

REVEIWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

## Chapter 18: Under the Moonlit Skies

Harry regained consciousness slowly. He blinked several times but the world was hazy and his eyelids seemed heavy. Finally, he began to remember what had happened, and his eyes flew open as adrenaline flooded his system. Well, that was only part of his panic. The other part was that he couldn't *feel* his magic. It was as if a part of him had been cut away. He tried to move, but found his hands and feet bound. Blinking and trying to calm himself, he focused on the scene in front of him.

He was in a dark and dingy room, leaning against a rotting wooden wall. He could hear creaking coming from the next room, and he watched as the door to the room he was in was slowly opened. Sirius Black stepped through, looking regretful. Harry tried to speak, but found himself unable to; Black had Silenced him.

"Harry, I'm sorry for what I've had to do. Just to let you know, that thing around your neck is a Magic Suppressor, it's an old family possession. I'm only using it because I want a chance to talk with you before you curse me."

Harry shot him a defiant glare.

Sirius sighed. "If I remove the Silencing Charm, will you agree to listen to what I have to say?"

Harry didn't react for a moment, then nodded stiffly. "*Finite*," Sirius cast.

"*Bastard*," Harry hissed.

Sirius shrugged. "Perhaps, though not for the reason you think, Harry."

"What are you talking about?" Harry demanded. "How complicated is the betrayal of your best friends?"

"In a way, Harry, I did betray them. I might as well have handed them over to Voldemort, but I *didn't!*" he said, his voice breaking.

Harry stared at him. *What was going on here? What did Sirius have to gain in this situation?* “Explain.”

Sirius looked instantly more upbeat at the prospect of getting Harry’s ear. “Harry, when your parents first went into hiding, they chose me as their Secret Keeper. I also went into hiding, and stayed that way for almost a year. They evaded detection from Voldemort, even though they were forced to remain at home. But shortly after Lily gave birth to you, I began to worry.”

He paused, measuring Harry’s reaction. “Go on,” Harry said. He wasn’t sure if he believed anything that Sirius was saying, but he was better off letting the man have his say. It’s not like he really had any choice, strung up as he was.

Sirius seemed to sigh with relief. “Thank you,” he said, and to Harry, it seemed like he actually meant it. “I feared that James choosing me as his Secret Keeper would be *too* obvious, that I would become a target and be forced to betray your parents.” He paused, his glazed blue eyes boring deep into the eyes that Harry had inherited from his mother. “I would have *died* before I betrayed them, Harry. I swear it,” he declared, his voice breaking.

Harry couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Somehow, he *knew* that this emotion was real, that Sirius wasn’t trying to deceive him; that somehow they had all been *wrong*. “What *happened* Bla-Sirius?” Harry asked him, his voice soft. “How did this *happen*?”

“You believe me?” Sirius asked, sounding stunned. “You believe that I’m telling the truth, that I’m *innocent*? ”

Harry grimaced. “Untie me, Sirius. I promise I won’t run.”

Sirius nodded. “Alright.” He waved his wand and Harry’s bonds fell away. Harry immediately began rubbing his sore wrists. “You’ll let me talk, right? I don’t *want* to hurt you, Harry. But at this point, the *only* thing that is more important than you is my *freedom*. I can’t do *anything* behind bars, understand?”

Harry nodded. “I do. Go ahead, tell me what happened.”

"It was *Peter*," Sirius began after a long pause. "Peter, always the *runt*, always the *tag-along*, always *ignored*, and always *lurking*, waiting in the shadows for his chance to serve his *new master*."

Harry stared at Sirius, certain the man had gone mad. "Peter?" Something clicked in his mind. "Peter...Pettigrew? Wormtail? He betrayed my parents?"

Sirius nodded. "More than just Lily and James; he was Voldemort's spy within the Order."

"So that's why you killed him," Harry reasoned. "Because you knew the truth."

Instead of confirming his logic, Sirius began bouncing around like a frustrated child. "NO! NO! NO! I didn't *kill* Peter! I bloody well *tried* but I didn't! He faked his own death! He's *still alive!*" Sirius appeared crazed now, and Harry was wondering just how much his stay in Azkaban had unbalanced him.

"Alright," Harry said, standing and raising his hands. "You didn't kill Pettigrew...what *happened?*" he asked slowly, his patience wearing thin.

"I...the night of Halloween, I was in hiding, staying in the flat of a buddy of mine, Mundungus Fletcher. I...guess I just had this bad feeling and decided to go check on Peter, make sure he was alright..."

"Wait a second," Harry interrupted him, his eyes narrowing. "How is it possible that no one knew you weren't my parents' Secret Keeper anymore? Surely Dumbledore would have known you were innocent and not allowed you to rot in Azkaban for twelve years. How is it possible that *Daphne* didn't know?"

Sirius sighed. "It was very foolish of us, but we decided not to let anyone outside of your parents, me, and Peter know about the switch. We decided together, and Peter was so damn convincing in his role of frightened and nervous friend that he nearly convinced us *not* to do it. Lily wasn't certain about it either. But James was so bloody determined to protect me that he overruled everyone. Lily performed

the Fidelius Charm; I'm sure Daphne's told you how good a Charms witch she was. If not for the war, I'm sure she could have found employment in the Ministry with her talent."

"What about *Daphne*?" Harry asked again. "How is it possible that she didn't tell her best friend, a woman that Daphne claims thought of her as a *sister*?" he demanded, his voice rising. This was a major hole in Sirius's rather convincing story. Though Harry suspected that Sirius was telling the truth, *suspecting* and *believing* were two entirely different things."

Sirius winced. "There was a perfectly good reason—" he began. Harry cut him off, his eyes flashing with rage.

"*Why didn't Daphne know?*" he asked through gritted teeth.

"Because we didn't *trust* her!" Sirius blurted out. "Because we thought she'd gone over to the *Dark*!"

Harry stared at him in disbelief. "*That*," he said, "is the worst excuse I've ever heard."

Sirius looked absolutely furious. "What has she *told* you?" he demanded. "What has she said about her past?"

Harry met his eyes, "She told me that following the murder of her family, she fell into anger and rage. And that as the war went on, she became ruthless in pursuing her duties. She said that she tortured and killed without thinking about it. And though she's never said it directly, it is perfectly clear to me that she is *frightened* of what she became. But she swears by the fact that *her loyalty never strayed*. That no matter what she did, no matter how intent on personal revenge she became, *she never gave one thought to abandoning Lily Evans Potter and her son*."

Now it was Sirius's turn to gape. "How can you just accept that? How can you look a woman with that much blood on her hands in the eyes without being *disgusted* by her! She went farther than *anyone*, Harry. The things she did..." He swallowed. "You *don't understand* what it was like, Harry. You don't understand what she..."

*“Enough,” Harry hissed. “What Daphne did or did not do is not what I asked you. Why didn’t she know that you and Peter had switched?”*

Sirius gave him a pleading look. “I already told you, Harry. Whether we were wrong or not is a different subject. But we *didn’t trust her*. We *didn’t* think she was going to join Voldemort or anything like *that*. But we thought that her rage had finally consumed her, that she had been driven *insane*. We believed that she was *dangerous*.”

“You were *wrong*,” Harry growled, his voice choked with emotion. “Daphne *loves* me. She would *die* for me. She gave me *everything*. She might as well be my *mother*!” he screamed.

Sirius’s eyes went wide. “What has she been *teaching* you? Did she teach you the Slicing Curse? Or those...whatever those things were you were shooting at me.”

“No and no,” Harry replied. “I began studying the Slicing Curse on my own last year. Daphne helped me perfect my technique. As for those...other things...that was more natural than anything else.” He shrugged. “I was angry enough to break through Daphne’s barriers and focus that power.” He panted, trying

“How—”

“No,” Harry told him firmly. “I don’t trust *you*, Sirius.”

“Fine,” Sirius said, throwing his hands up. He clenched his teeth, and looked very anxious all of a sudden. “Harry, I need you to *listen* to me.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Go ahead.”

He flailed his hands and began pacing around, obviously trying to figure out what to say. Harry crossed his arms, trying to ignore the weight of the Black’s Magic Suppressor around his neck. He had a bad feeling about where this conversation was heading. “Harry,” he began, “have you ever considered that it isn’t best for you to continue living with Daphne?”

Harry didn’t flinch. “Of course not.”

"Has she...has she ever hurt you?" he asked.

Harry closed his eyes as images of the torture he'd endured in the Chamber of Secrets flashed through his mind. Daphne's eyes, dark and full of malice and hatred. The feeling that he was about to die, the desire to end all of the pain permanently... He shuddered involuntarily, and Sirius didn't miss it.

He gaped at Harry. "She *did*, didn't she. *Oh Harry...*"

His eyes still closed, he shook his head violently. "No, it wasn't like *that*."

"Then what happened?" Sirius demanded. "What did she *do* to you? *Why*?"

"You wouldn't *understand*. You weren't *there!*" Harry told him, his voice almost hysterical. "She didn't *mean* to hurt me!"

"*Explain it to me, then,*" Sirius said slowly. "What did she do, and *why*?"

"She wasn't...she wasn't *thinking*," Harry said, feeling sweat begin to soak his brow as he tried to explain the inexplicable and fight the memories at the same time. "She didn't... It wasn't *abuse*, Sirius."

"I never said it was," Sirius said calmly, though Harry could tell that Sirius was controlling his emotions, in attempt to seem more relaxed than he actually was. Harry felt like he was *defending* Daphne, defending her claim as his guardian. It didn't make any sense. *What does Sirius know? Why do I need to tell him what happened in the Chamber? Daphne was beside herself when she found out, and stayed by my side the entire time. She never blamed me for resenting her; she accepted my right to be angry about what she did. She's taught me so much, been everything I could have asked her to be...*

But as much as Harry wanted to deny it, he always had a nagging doubt in the back of his mind that Daphne might be hurting him more than she knew. That her inability to master her own past had spilled over onto him, that she would be unable to keep him safe until she

could put herself back together and stop thinking rationally. That no matter how much she loved him, she was *dangerous* to him.

He shook his head. *How can I even think that? Yes, she's unbalanced. Yes, she's vengeful. But how much has she given me? Where would I be without her?*

"*Harry!*" Sirius barked. "What did she *do* to you?"

He turned on his godfather, all doubts erased, eyes blazing with fury. "*What's it to you, Black?*"

Sirius stared at him. "*What's it to me?* I'm only your bloody *Godfather!* It's my *duty* to take care of you. Why else do you think I broke out of Azkaban? Because I was bored?"

Harry couldn't respond to that. Sirius sighed. "Harry, please, tell me what happened. It can't have been *that* bad," he said, sounding almost hopeful.

Harry closed his eyes. "You have no *idea*."

Sirius snapped, finally losing any composure he'd previously had. "*What did she do, Harry? WHAT THE BLOODY HELL DID SHE DO?*"

"She put me under the Cruciatus Curse!" Harry blurted. "She was tricked by Riddle. Are you *happy* now?" he demanded, sighing. "That's not all, either. She also used a Spirit-Banishing Spell. She managed to extricate Riddle, but...well it did a lot of damage." He sighed. "She was absolutely devastated, Sirius. She might have killed herself if I hadn't survived. Actually, I'm damn near certain she *would* have killed herself if I had died..."

Harry noticed know that Sirius was staring at him, mouth agape. It was highly likely he hadn't heard most of what Harry had just said. "*What?*" he demanded. "*She put you under the Cruciatus Curse?*" Sirius asked quietly, his voice high and hysterical. "Harry, *how...*"

"She was trying to *protect* me," Harry insisted. "She'd been fooled, they all had. Riddle possessed me using a Diary that was secretly given to me by Lucius Malfoy. He made me...attack other students,

do his bidding. He tried to kill Ginny and me so that he could restore himself to body.”

“*Riddle..?*” Sirius asked, still sounding a bit out of it.

“*Voldemort*,” Harry explained. “That was his real name, during his school days.”

Sirius’s eyes were bulging now. “I cannot believe what I am hearing. This...*this...*”

“It’s over, Sirius,” Harry told him. “And in the long run, I’ve benefited from it.”

“*Benefited?*”

Harry swallowed. “The power that I can now wield I acquired during that ordeal. Most of it is the power that was imbued in the Diary. I haven’t learned to fully control it, hence the barriers I mentioned earlier. But I’m getting there. I can...turn it on and off, I suppose you could say, pull it back in or let it back out.”

Sirius sat down hard on the bed. “We’re leaving...you’re coming with me.”

Harry stared at him as if he’d finally lost it. “No, I’m not. We’re going to Dumbledore, and you’re going to explain everything you just told me. With some luck, we can make you a free man.”

“I don’t care about that, Harry,” Sirius told him. “What I care about is you. And I’m not leaving here without you.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed to slits. “I am *not* leaving Daphne,” he said softly. “She’s a mother to me, Sirius, and no matter what you may believe, I’m as safe with her as I will be anywhere else. Probably safer than I would be with *you*.”

“Yes, you *are*,” Sirius insisted, apparently ignoring Harry’s last protest. “Harry, you have to trust me. You’ll see that I’m right, that she’s dangerous to you. She’s unstable, she’s *Dark*. I won’t see you fall along with her; I won’t let her drag you down.”

“She’ll *kill* you, Sirius. She’ll *kill* you if you try to poison my mind against her. And for that matter, you’re fighting a losing cause. She’s made me what I am, and I will be eternally grateful for that. She has prepared me for what I have to do.”

“Which *is?*” Sirius demanded. “What great quest does she *claim* lies before you?”

“She *claims* nothing, Sirius. If it were up to her, I still wouldn’t know about my destiny. And to fulfill that destiny I must stay here. The only thing that would come of you spiriting me off and keeping me inside a safe bubble would be the ultimate destruction of the Wizarding world. If you were so concerned about me, you should have thought of me *before* you went off on an ill-advised and reckless mission to hunt down Pettigrew.”

“You were already *gone*,” Sirius pleaded. “I was...overcome by emotion, not thinking straight...”

“You were *driven* by *revenge*,” Harry corrected. “You wanted Pettigrew to *die*. You had no thought of justice, no thought of following proper legal proceedings. You went there to *kill* him. Now, *why* is it that you believe *you* have the right to feel superior to Daphne?” Harry asked rhetorically.

Sirius blanched, his face reddening in anger. “Don’t you *dare* compare me to that...that...”

“Woman? Witch?” Harry asked. “You *aren’t* taking me *anywhere*, Black. Either we’re going up to Hogwarts where you will release me into Daphne’s custody, or we will stay here...until Remus arrives, that is.”

“You know?” Sirius asked. He shook his head. “Of course you would know, *stupid Sirius*.”

“You’re talking to yourself,” Harry pointed out.

Sirius’s head snapped in his direction. “Am I? I suppose that I shouldn’t be on the verge of panic after listening to you speak, after listening to the completely indifferent tone in which you describe how

your *guardian* used an *Unforgivable* on you! Listening to you describe your *destiny* as one would an upcoming exam. Merlin, what has she *done to you?*"

"Nothing, Sirius. She's raised me and giving me all the love and care I could ever ask for. And that is why I will *not* betray her."

"You're *blinded*, Harry, can't you see? You *know* that I'm right..."

"*Shut up,*" Harry hissed. "I've had enough of this, Black. I refuse to go with you, and we're both running out of time. Do you really think that my friends aren't wondering where I am? How long do you think it will be until Daphne finds out, until she arrives? Do you think that the first thing she does when she sees you will be to find out if you are really innocent? No. The first thing she'll do is get me away from you, then..."

Sirius brandished his wand, aiming it in Harry's face. "I didn't want to do this, Harry, but you've given me no choice. Either I Stun you and carry you out of here, or you come with me. Now."

"Go to Hell, Black!" Harry spat. He tried to summon his magic, tried to use the anger he felt to burst through the restraints of the Magical Suppressor...and failed. He felt no rush of power. He was helpless. He could probably attack Sirius physically, but the man had two wands, and he had none.

"That's no going to work, Harry," Sirius said. "I know you're angry with me, but trust me, you'll thank me for it lat—" Black stopped upon hearing a noise, one familiar to him. "Oh *bloody hell,*" he cursed. "Remus, couldn't you have *waited*?"

Sirius appeared panicked as he tried to figure out what to do. Harry realized that he couldn't just Stun his Godson and carry him away with the Magical Suppressor on. Any magic that was supposed to affect Harry would be repulsed, and so an Obscuring Charm would cover Sirius, but not Harry. The same was true for any kind of Disillusionment Charm or Concealing Charm. There was only one kind of spell, three of them, to be precise, that would work in this situation. But Black *wouldn't...*

Sirius turned to face him, his expression full of regret. "I'm really, *really* sorry about this, Harry. *Imperio!*"

Harry watched, dumbfounded, as the white light of the Imperius Curse enveloped him. He fought desperately, trying to resist, but without his magic, he was as powerless as any Muggle. Determination only made a difference with something to back it up.

*Come with me*, Sirius's voice echoed in his head.

Harry's feet obeyed the command and Sirius led Harry out through the hidden passageway, and they began moving slowly towards the edge of the forest. Harry raged desperately, trying to fight his fear of being controlled, but failed. Though his face remained blank, tears formed in his eyes.

Sirius looked back on him, his face twisted by mental agony. He was obviously conflicted by what he had done. But Harry didn't care. All he felt for the man was pure, unadulterated hatred.

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"*Where is Harry?*" a voice demanded, originating from behind them. Hermione and Ginny spun around, and found themselves face to face with an enraged Daphne Dressler. Her cheeks were flushed with anger and exertion, and her eyes blazed with an unquenchable rage. Her blond hair, cut shorter than when they'd seen it last, not reaching the shoulders anymore, and was in disarray. She'd obviously left in a hurry.

"Daphne?" Ginny asked in surprise. "What are you doing here?" She shrank back a bit from Daphne's harsh glare. Hermione did the same. They'd never seen Daphne so angry at the two of them.

"*Protecting my son,*" she gritted out. "*Where is he?*" she asked again, much louder this time.

"We don't know," Hermione blurted in a rush. "He got a letter from Hagrid asking him to come visit his hut, *alone*. He hasn't gotten back yet and we're getting worried. I've been trying to find a Professor—"

Daphne looked like she was going to explode. "You *let* him go *alone*?" she demanded, her voice shaking with anger. "You allowed him, despite the threat to his *life*, to go *alone*?" Hermione was suddenly beginning to understand why Daphne had been so feared. She looked like she was ready to curse the two girls into oblivion.

"Hagrid's note said—" Ginny began to protest, her voice a frightened squeak.

Daphne's sharp reply cut her off. "I cannot *believe* you two. Hagrid may be a buffoon at times, but he isn't *stupid*. Do you *really* think, with full knowledge about Black and the threat he poses to Harry, that he would *insist* Harry come *alone*? He was beside himself after that bloody chicken mauled Harry. Do you think, for the sake of privacy, that Hagrid would risk Harry's *life*?" Hermione's blood froze, and a shiver ran through her body. Her forehead was wet with a cold sweat.

"*Oh no,*" she whispered, horrified. "I can't *believe* I was that *stupid!* What kind of friend—"

"*Forget it,*" Daphne snapped. "There's *no* doubt in my mind that Black has him *right now*. You two are coming with me as backup. I have no *idea* where the rest of the staff is, and I don't particularly *care*. I can *handle* Black, but if he has help, I might need you. Come on," she ordered gruffly, obviously in no mood to listen to reason. Hermione thought it was insanely irresponsible of her to bring a pair of young girls into harm's way, but she wasn't about to tell Daphne that.

She rushed to keep up with Daphne, Ginny trailing her. Daphne dashed through the corridors and out the front doors, followed by the two horrified girls.

Hermione had a bad feeling about this.

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*Several hours previous:*

"Where is Greyback?" Peter whispered as he emerged from the Forest, finding Amycus and Alecto exactly where he'd expected to. They were dressed in hooded black robes.

"It's a full moon," Amycus reminded him, pointing to the sky, "He went into the Forest hours ago, trying to position himself close to the edge of the forest. He'll be drawn to any action that takes place nearby."

"Is there any guarantee he won't bite *us*?" Peter demanded. "Unless he takes Wolfsbane, he can't control himself."

"To an extent, he can," Alecto told him. "Because he has *embraced* the wolf, and no longer fights it's control, he has the ability to control who he attacks. At least, that's what he claims. He says that once he's on someone, the wolf takes over completely, and either bites the victim or..."

"I don't need to know the rest," Peter assured her, shivering.

"He's also, well...he's *hunting* Potter. That is his mission, and he determined to carry it out," Amycus explained. "He won't attack anyone else unless they attempt to block his pursuit of Potter."

Peter wasn't exactly comfortable with that response, as it failed to explain what would stop Greyback from tearing the three Death Eaters limb-from-bloody-limb once he'd Turned or fatally mauled The-Boy-Who-Lived. Nonetheless, they had no choice but to carry on. He quickly explained the situation to the brother and sister, at least, as well as he could. He knew that Black had taken Potter. He suspected they'd gone to the Shrieking Shack. He also knew that *that* place would soon be occupied by another not-so-human resident, and that Black would need to flee. If they could intercept them, kill Black, and take Harry, dead or alive, they might be able to escape without even having to face Dressler, whom Peter knew was already at Hogwarts, as he'd seen her Apparate at the edge of the wards, sprinting for the castle.

Peter gestured in the direction of the forest, placing his finger to his lips. Alecto and Amycus understood, and they followed. They silently made their way through the forest. Peter had an uncanny sense of direction, an odd ability that, strangely enough, seemed to have come from his Muggle father, who never seemed to get lost no matter how far into a forest he would venture, no matter how many back roads he traveled in his old, beaten-up Vauxhall.

And so, even without a Navigation Spell (he needed to use a Lighting Charm to illuminate their path), they continued their trek through the Forest. Peter knew that dozens of dangerous magical creatures, among them, centaurs, who held a deep dislike of any humans that trespassed in their territory, lurked in the darkness. He could only hope they would meet no resistance. He turned to glanced back at Amycus and Alecto. The older man's expression was stoic, determined. Alecto's expression was blank, almost oblivious. She had always been good at showing a complete lack of concern even when she was actually terrified. Fear was poison in combat, and outward displays of it demoralized an army.

Peter led them deeper into the forest, ears always listening for signs of danger. Or, more specifically, the heavy paw-falls of Fenrir Greyback.

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The clouds parted and the beam of moonlight fired down from the heavens to land on the figure below. Inside Fenrir Greyback, crouched on all fours about a half-kilometer from the edge of the forest, something sinister *stirred*.

His amber eyes drawn inexorably to the sight of the full moon shining brightly through the branches of the leafless trees above him, Fenrir relinquished control of his body and mind, and welcomed the return of the Wolf. Ancient Dark Magic swirled within him, transforming his very muscle, bone, and tissue. His body began to sprout short fur, his face elongated into a long snout. His limbs grew and changed shape as his torso was enlarged.

He screamed involuntarily from the pain of his transformation, but that scream quickly became a long, echoing howl. He collapsed to the ground as his body completed the metamorphosis from heavily built man to long, lean, muscled werewolf.

Fenrir's mind *joined* with it's partner, his own thoughts and emotions swirling and mixing with the animal instincts of his wolf. But this was not an equal partnership; the Wolf was clearly the dominant one. And Fenrir, unlike many of his kind, fully accepted that. He was an *animal*, not a man. Not for this one night of the month.

And so, instead of the mental agony experienced by many a werewolf as they fought a desperate, ultimately futile battle for control, he experienced a deep satisfaction. *This was who he was.*

He lifted his head and sniffed the air. He smelled Potter, not by his scent but by his magical presence. The boy was strong.

A pity he'd never reach his full potential.

Fenrir *hunted*.

---

Sirius tried to figure out a plan to escape into the forest while still maintaining his strained control over his Godson's mind. It didn't make it any easier that he was fighting himself. He was *repulsed*, *horrified* by both what he had done and what he was still doing. He'd actually surprised himself; he hadn't thought himself capable of executing the Unforgivable, but perhaps the desperation he'd felt had given him that extra edge.

He told himself yet again that he was serving a higher cause, that he was insuring that James's son would spend the rest of his youth safe and happy, away from the dangerous and unstable Daphne. It would difficult, he knew, to evade capture and still provide some sense of stability, but perhaps he could contact Dumbledore and explain his situation. The man had always had a soft spot for him, he thought. Perhaps he could be made to convince Daphne that it was for the best that Sirius cared for Harry; that she was harming him even as she tried to help.

He had no idea if it would work, but it wasn't as though he had any real choice.

Harry docilely followed him as he made his way towards the Forest. They were *almost there...*

Sirius's danger sense flared, and he spun quickly to the side. It saved his life.

Sirius just barely avoided the Severing Curse that would have bisected him at the hip, nearly losing his grip on Harry's mind, but

managing to hold on desperately. He turned around, wand drawn, though he already knew exactly what he was about to see. Daphne Artemis Dressler...and two younger girls, who Sirius guessed were Harry's friends Ginny and Hermione.

"*Black*," she hissed. Her eyes were dark now with rage now, darker and more terrifying than Sirius had ever seen them. He'd seen that look before, seen it in the eyes of Death Eaters as they mercilessly cut down their victims.

Sirius drew Harry in front of him. Guilt hammered at him for using his Imperiused Godson as a shield, but again he reminded himself that he *had no choice*.

Daphne's eyes, if it were possible, darkened further, until they were almost midnight black. "*You bastard*," she hissed. "*Is this what you've been reduced to, Sirius? Abducting the son of the man you betrayed and using him as a shield?*"

Sirius pulled Harry closer. Daphne could probably see that Harry's eyes were opaque, a dead give-away that he was under the Imperious Curse. "*And you questioned my use of Unforgivables, traitor?*" she added, her voice a menacing whisper that somehow carried clearly to Sirius's terrified ears.

"*Let him go, and I might not take your sanity from you. I might not make you beg for mercy before I destroy your throat. I might not leave you to bleed to death out here,*" Daphne said in a chilling whisper.

Before Sirius could reply, he felt a flash of danger, and spun around. Daphne was ahead of him, and hurriedly fired a curse in the direction of the noise that had startled her.

It missed, but it illuminated a trio of black-robed figures that been hidden in the shadows at the edge of the forest.

---

Daphne's mind worked furiously. As unlikely as it might have been, as irrational as it might be, she *knew* that she was staring at three Death Eaters. It was impossible to make out their features, but she

felt three familiar presences. Two were very similar, the other was completely different, but she couldn't place where she had felt it before. It didn't matter. She'd determined their identities from what was left of their bodies.

Taking advantage of Sirius's distraction, she Summoned Harry to her. She hurled two Slicing Curses in the general direction of the intruders to pin them down, and then broke Sirius's hold on Harry's mind with a sharp burst of Legilimency that made the traitor recoil in pain. With a wave of her wand, she ripped the Magic Suppressor off of his neck, hurling it toward the edge of the Forest. Harry's eyes cleared, and he blinked in confusion. "Get out of here," she whispered. "Don't run for the castle; you'll be too exposed. Take your friends and get into the Forest. Hide and wait for me."

Harry nodded in understanding and broke for where Hermione and Ginny waited behind her. Daphne turned to face her attackers, and thanked Merlin that they were so slow to respond. She still had no idea with they were doing here, but they obviously hadn't been expecting a fight, let alone a fight with *her*. They finally began raising their wands, all three of them aiming at her. She had a fight on her hands. She had fought more than one enemy before, but it was not an easy task. Because of the sheer volume of unfriendly spells that were hurled at you simultaneously, you had to move quickly while deflecting anything that was close. If you had an opening, you needed to make it count. Sometimes you didn't get one. You had to wait until one of your opponents made a mistake, and then make them pay for it. Those who wasted opportunities didn't survive to learn this lesson.

A hail of various Dark spells shot at her. She quickly determined that none of them was a Killing Curse, the only one she couldn't stop with a strong Servos Shield. She made a split-second decision and dove toward the ground, rolling over and coming up on a knee. She fired two Slicing Curses before rolling to avoid another volley. She couldn't see or Harry now, and she could only hope that he was currently fleeing deep into the woods. She knew that centaurs did not harm children, and she would take her chances if faced with a choice between having them flee over open ground and having them possibly encounter an angry centaur.

The next volley came at her, but a quick read revealed a pair of Slicing Curses and a Blinding Curse. She barked the incantation for a Servos Shield, and the jade-green haze in front of her sent the three curses flying in random directions. She didn't have the luxury of reflecting the spells back at her attackers, nor could she use a shield that would absorb the spells, because both required time she simply didn't have.

Sirius was directly behind her, and she had been using a sliver of concentration to make sure he didn't try to hit her in the back. It was evident that he wasn't with these Death Eaters, and that he was as surprised at their presence as Daphne was. Now, she felt him move...towards the Forest.

He was going after Harry.

Daphne disengaged, diving toward the ground, rolling twice and using her momentum to push herself to her feet. She dashed on a diagonal towards Sirius, then fired a Severing Curse at the area directly in front of him. He stopped dead. Had he continued, the curse would have cut him in half. He screamed at her, sounding enraged. "What the bloody hell are you *doing*? I'm on *your* side!"

"*STAY AWAY FROM HIM, BLACK!*" she shrieked, hurling four curses back in the direction of the Death Eaters, who were trying to take advantage of her momentary distraction. They had to hit the ground, unable to summon powerful shields fast enough to prevent the lethal curses from hitting them. One of them cursed. It was a woman. The other two were short and somewhat stocky. Again, she was reminded of someone...

Then it hit her. She knew now why two of their magical signatures were so similar. They were *related*. She smiled grimly. Two of the Death Eaters were Amycus and Alecto Carrow. And if she had a chance, she would kill both of them.

Daphne didn't *like* using the Unforgivables. They reminded her too much of when she had lost control, when she had been consumed by her rage. She used them only when she genuinely wanted her targets to die. But if one of her curses took a head off? So be it.

But she had marked Amycus and Alecto for death. They had been involved in the raid that had taken her husband from her...and they were going to pay the price.

She soon realized that she was in a very dangerous situation. The Death Eaters had gotten up and moved forward now, and now Daphne, Sirius, and the three hooded figures were in a roughly triangular formation.

And then two of them, Alecto and Amycus, broke formation, making a run for the Forest. They were going after the children. They were trying to capture or kill *Harry*.

She cursed Dumbledore for his complacency. *How was it possible that he didn't know what was going on?*

She turned and hurling a Bludgeoning Curse at Sirius with such viciousness and ferocity that it caught him completely off guard. The spell slammed into his midsection and sent him flying through the air, hitting hard on his back about 10 meters away. He moaned in pain.

She turned to face her lone remaining attacker. She could only pray that Harry, Hermione, and Ginny would escape them. She knew that that they, especially the two girls, stood no chance against Amycus and Alecto. It would not be the first time that those two had cut down a pair of innocent teenage girls with an Unforgivable. Merciless Amycus would probably torture them before finally ending their all-too-short lives.

As for Harry...well, it depended on their objective. But she had no intention of letting them take him either. She needed to kill this remaining Death Eater. She drew her wand back, allowing the images of her dead family to rush into her mind. She focused on the leering faces of the McCourns, and felt the Dark Magic swell and swirl around, let it flood through her, allowed its poison to seep into her veins.

The third figure tried to run but tripped. Daphne aborted her Killing Curse and dashed to where he was frantically trying to get to his feet. She *had* to know who this person was, why she kept feeling a strange familiarity she simply could place. She lunged and tackled him. His

hood slipped off, and in the faint light of the moon, Daphne saw the terrified face of Peter Pettigrew. She froze in shock, and it cost her. Peter hit her in the face, causing her to recoil and roll off of him. Then his body began to shrink, and in seconds an-all-too-familiar gray garden rat was scampering for the Forest.

Alone now, she turned back to Sirius, who was staggering to his feet. “*Daphne*,” he gasped. “We’re on the *same side*. I don’t *want* Harry hurt.”

Having just seen a man she thought Black had killed wearing the robes of a Death Eater and in the company of Amycus and Alecto, she suddenly found his claims *much* easier to believe. But she couldn’t be sure. Perhaps they had *both* been traitors. She didn’t have time to find out. She fired another Bludgeoning Curse at him.

“*FOR MERLIN’S SAKE!*” Sirius screamed, “*I’M ON YOUR SIDE!*”

“*Stay back, Black*,” she warned. “I’m going after Harry. *Stay here*,” she ordered him. If he obeyed, the odds that he was truly innocent were even greater.

She didn’t wait to see if he had. She dashed for the woods.

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Hermione ran.

She jumped over a log that blocked her path, kept ducking behind trees and looking back to see if she was being followed. She didn’t know where she was going, but she figured that if she got lost, she could always use a Navigation Spell to find her way back. Right now, her job was to stay alive.

She didn’t know what had happened to Harry and Ginny. She’d wanted to stick together, but the intensity burning in Harry’s emerald eyes had silenced any protests. His voice had been eerily calm, and he’d sounded quite rational as he explained in a whisper that they needed to split up and confuse their pursuers. She hadn’t known how he knew what to do, or even if he had any idea what he was doing. But she knew she had to trust him, or all three of them would die. Her mind kept flashing back to the life-or-death struggle she and Harry

had fought deep beneath the school as they tried to break through to the Philosopher's Stone. Of course, pretending that those cloaked figures, who were, Hermione suspected, followers of Voldemort, better known as Death Eaters, were giant chess pieces wasn't that helpful, but the same concepts applied.

*Stay alive. Keep fighting. Keep running. Stay alive.*

She stopped suddenly as she heard a wolf-like howl come from deeper inside the forest. *Wolves?* She wondered. She chastised herself for thinking too much like a Muggle. It was *far* worse than that, she realized. It was a werewolf.

Could it be...*Remus*? She wondered. She suspected, though she didn't know, that her favorite professor wasn't a pure human wizard. Her research for the essay that Snape had assigned, the essay that Harry seemed quite irritated by, had revealed a number of suspicious coincidences. But Harry's anger seemed to imply that Snape was trying to expose Remus. This was something that she thought was rather likely, given the obvious hostility that existed between Snape and Remus. She knew from Harry that Remus had been one of James Potter's best friends, and that James hadn't treated Snape well. Harry seemed rather disgusted with his father, to be perfectly honest.

So occupied by her thoughts she nearly ran headlong into a tree. Instead, she tried to stop herself and run around it, but her trainer caught in one of the roots. She fell forward and heard a sharp crack. Pain flooded up her left leg, and she rolled down into a depression. She pulled her leg up to her chest, clutching both hands inches from it, as the rational part of her brain told her not to touch it and worsen the injury.

She lay there for a minute, trying to fight through the pain. She wasn't sure if it was her leg or her ankle (though she realized there really wasn't any difference,) but *something* was broken. She wasn't going to be running back out of the Forest.

She tried to gather her wits about her. She thought she'd been running for almost ten minutes at full speed, so it meant she was at least a kilometer inside the Forest. She tried to hold her leg still, tried

to keep the sharp agony that shot up left leg whenever she moved from overwhelming her. She was breathing heavily, and she felt tears in her eyes. She was helpless, completely helpless. Should one of the ersatz Death Eaters come upon her, they would simply kill her and be done with it. Why would they let a *Mudblood* like her survive?

She tried to control her breathing, struggling to slow her heartbeat and prevent herself from panicking. She was a big girl; she would not just melt down like this and wait for the end. She was going to find a way out of this.

The pain was still there, but it was more of a dull pain. It was swelling up, and perhaps that was dulling the pain...she didn't know, her parents were dentists, not physicians. She didn't know much about human anatomy; all she knew was that it ***hurt***.

She rolled onto her back, staring up at the canopy of trees and the moonlit sky above her. Somehow, the view was relaxing, even given her desperate situation. She lay there for several minutes, trying to distract herself from the pain. She succeeded, to an extent. Still, she knew that unless it got a whole lot better, she wasn't going to be walking out of the Forest under her own power.

She considered for a moment firing off a spell of some sort as a beacon. The risk was, of course, that she would attract the wrong kind of attention, and in her weakened state, be unable to fight them off. But she might never be found if she just stayed here.

Though she wasn't particularly religious, she still whispered a short prayer as she groped around for her wand. She pointed it toward the sky, and gasped a short incantation. Red sparks shot out of her wand and flickered just above the tree line. She collapsed back to the ground, letting her wand fall from her hand.

She felt completely drained, and began to feel drowsy. She tried to fight it, tried to stay awake, and managed it, albeit while also shifting her broken leg, causing it to throb angrily. She tried to hold back tears, tried to cling to hope.

Hermione waited. She waited for what seemed like an hour, though she knew it was probably far less than that. She closed her eyes, and

then opened them as she heard a rustling sound coming from her right. She tried to find her wand but saw that it had rolled away from her, farther than she could reach. She tried to gently shift her body but hissed in pain as her leg complained. The rustling grew louder. It was obvious now that someone...or *something*, was coming. *Was it Harry? Ginny? Daphne?*

She had no idea. She glanced up as a dark figure emerged from the brush and stared down at her. “*Granger?*” a familiar voice asked. “What the bloody hell are you doing out here?”

Hermione squinted and could just barely make out the silhouette of a boy dressed in Hogwarts robes. “Who..?” she asked softly. He moved into the light. “Zabini? Blaise?”

“Yeah, it’s me...are you alright?” he asked, glancing back over his shoulder. He carefully made his way down the embankment to where Hermione lay.

Hermione didn’t reply, hissing in pain as she made the mistake of trying to prop herself up to get a better view of her unlikely rescuer. “What are you *doing* out here?” she gasped.

Blaise grinned sheepishly, “Would you believe me if I said it was part of a bet? Nott told me...never mind *that*,” he said, changing topics. “What are you *doing* out here?”

As she called to mind everything that had happened, her panic began to build. The pain from her leg seemed to increase along with it. “Black took Harry,” she gasped. “Daphne brought us with her...Death Eaters...”

Blaise frowned at her. “Slow down, Granger,” he said. “First, before you tell me what happened, how badly and where are you hurt? I assume you wouldn’t be lying on the ground like this if you had a choice.”

“Left leg,” she told him, “think I broke it.”

Blaise got down on a knee. He made as if to pull the hem of her robes up, then stopped and gave her a meaningful look. She nodded,

and he gently uncovered her leg. "Yeah, it's all swollen up and looks a bit misaligned. It's broken alright," he said softly. He scratched his head. "I don't know many Healing Spells, though. Could I Levitate you out of here?"

"Through the *Forest*?" she asked incredulously. "What if you drop me? Can you hold your concentration for that long?"

Blaise shook his head. "Probably not. I guess that's not an option. I could make a splint, I guess, though I'm not really sure how to set that bone."

"I'd really rather you didn't mess around with a broken bone if you don't know what you're doing," Hermione said, feeling short of breath. The pain was coming back now as she focused on her injury.

"That's perfectly understandable," Blaise admitted. "Can I at least help you sit up? You probably aren't very comfortable lying on your back like that."

She bit her lip in anxiety, then nodded slowly. Blaise shifted around so that he was behind her, then gently lifted her upper body up. He stopped. "Do you mind leaning against me?" he asked. "I don't want to move you so that you can lean against the embankment."

"I honestly don't care," Hermione told him.

With that, he shifted his body so that she was leaning on his chest. It felt awkward to Hermione, but somehow it felt comforting as well. She didn't give it much thought. "We have to get out of here," she told him. "I'm not completely sure what's going on, but there are at least four people running around the grounds who I don't really want to run into. We need to get to Hogwarts and warn the teachers."

"You mentioned *Death Eaters*?" Blaise asked.

"Yes...at least, that's what I thought they were. Daphne, you know, Harry's guardian, had just found Harry and Sirius and started shooting spells at him. Then these three others showed up and Daphne must have told Harry to tell us to run into the Forest and

scatter. She thought that the path back up to Hogwarts was too exposed."

"She's right about that," Blaise agreed, "but I'm not sure how much safer it is to send a bunch of students into the Forbidden Forest. Either way, we've got to get out of here...I also, well..." he trailed off.

Hermione shifted, wincing as she did so, trying to look him in the eyes, a cold fear shivering down her spine.

"I thought I heard screaming," he said grimly. "It was a girl, I could tell that, even though it was so far away. Then it just...stopped."

Hermione's mind was instantly flooded with visions of Ginny's tortured body, and she shuddered. "We've got to tell them," she said, filled with a new resolve. "We've got to leave. Now!" she all but shouted.

"Alright," Blaise agreed. "You've still got one good leg, right? Hang on, I'm going to find a stick and splint your leg. This might hurt, but I won't do anything that Madam Pomfrey can't fix. I don't want to hurt you, but if you're right, I don't want to stay here any longer than you did."

He let her lie back down on the cold soil, and climbed back up the embankment. He returned less than a minute later with a stick about the length of her lower leg. He placed the stick next to her broken limb, then began ripping his robe sleeves apart. He looked at her intently. "This *is* going to hurt, Granger," he told her, "Alright, I'll try to do this fast."

Hermione gritted her teeth and tried to keep herself from screaming as Blaise made an attempt to set her leg, then loosely bound her leg to the stick. Pain was flooding her in waves, and Blaise looked concerned, but said nothing. He waited until she spoke. "I think...I think I'm okay now."

"Alright, I think...I think I might be able to carry you on my own...if you don't mind, of course," Blaise added.

Hermione stared at him as if he'd grown an extra head. "Of course I *don't mind*; what do you *think*? That I *want* to stay here. Just be

gentle,” she cautioned. “I know a couple of spells that might make me lighter.”

“So do I,” Blaise told her. He drew his wand from his robes and pointed it at the sky, “*Finite*,” he cast. The red spark faded into nothingness. Next, he turned to wand on her, and cast, “*Relevo*.” She didn’t feel different, but when he bent down and carefully pulled her into his arms, he didn’t seem to be expending much effort. He tried to keep the pain to a minimum, but the dangling leg wasn’t cooperating and bumped against his arm. She bit back a cry of pain and Blaise gave her an apologetic look. She pointed with her arm back in the direction of Hogwarts, and he slowly climbed out of the depression and began walking.

He wasn’t looking at her as he carried her, staring straight ahead into the darkness. Hermione reached into her robes for her wand (Blaise had retrieved it) and cast a Lighting Charm. Blaise smiled down at her. “Good idea.”

They said nothing for several minutes until Hermione asked. “Why did you come for me?”

Blaise smirked. “Doesn’t seem like a very *Slytherin* thing to do, does it? Well, I guess...I saw the sparks, and that’s the universal sign for distress, and well...wanted to help.”

“That’s all?” Hermione asked, surprised.

Blaise shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. I might be a Slytherin, but I’m not a *heartless coward*...mind you, had I known what was going on, I might have had second thoughts about going into the Forest alone with Death Eaters running around...but I couldn’t live with myself if I could have done something, especially if I could have easily gotten out of there myself-”

“Blaise?” Hermione interrupted him.

He stopped and stared down at her. “What?”

“Thank you,” she said.

"Uh...you're welcome," Blaise said, somewhat awkwardly.

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Ginny glanced back over her shoulder, trying to keep her calm. She was being chased by a female Death Eater, and she was scared to death. She didn't want to die, she told herself. She was *far* too young.

She ran into a clearing, desperately searching for a clear path. But as she spotted one and ran towards it, another figure, clad in hooded black robes, emerged out of the trees, wand aimed in her direction. She raised her wand and cast a Stunning Spell, but the Death Eater easily blocked it, laughing at her feeble effort. She tried to remember what she had learned from Harry, and dropped into her best impression of a dueling stance after stepping back several steps. She could only hope that the woman that had seen her five minutes of hard running ago had given up, and wouldn't be sneaking up behind her to deliver a death blow.

The Death Eater laughed, a high chuckle that sent shivers up her spine. She tried to stand her ground. "You are going to fight *me*, Little Girl?" he taunted. He smiled viciously underneath the hood of his robes. "You should have run when you had the chance. I'm not planning to make this quick for you," he told her. Ginny tried to tune out what he was saying and focus on what she had to do. She doubted she could defeat this man in a duel, but it wasn't as though she had a choice. She fired another Stunning Spell, then tried a Striking Curse. The Death Eater slapped both of them aside like they were nothing. "Pathetic," he snarled.

He advanced towards her, and she continued to back up, stopping just short of the tree behind her to allow her some maneuvering room. The Death Eater laughed softly, then began firing curses. Most of them were Slicing Curses, and they were aimed at her feet. She performed a kind of macabre dance, desperately trying to avoid losing a foot.

"You can't dance around them forever, girl," the man taunted. He fired two more curses at her, both shoulder level. Ginny ducked both spells, then fired a Blinding Curse. Her inexperience with the curse was obvious, as it lacked even the punch of her other weak attempts. He

didn't even need to put up a shield, as the magic dissipated before it hit the man.

"Enough of these games," he snarled. "*Crucio*."

The jagged jet of white light struck Ginny in the midsection and hurled her backwards. She slammed into the tree, but barely felt the impact as her nervous system was flooded with agony. She slid down the trunk onto the ground, kicking and writhing helplessly in an attempt to escape the searing pain. She felt like her head was going to explode even as her skin burned as if it had been set alight, and she shrieked until she was out of breath. Her throat burned, and she vomited.

The curse was lifted, and she gasped for air. She curled up into a ball, rocking back and forth, shivers of pain still shooting through her body. The Death Eater laughed. "Poor Little Girl. Never felt such pain before now. How about another dose? *Crucio*."

Again Ginny's nerves were assaulted. She shrieked again, pounding helpless fists into the ground in a vain attempt to stop the pain. She cried helplessly, her screams disappearing into the night. She was going to die out here, alone, with no one but this merciless Death Eater. And at this point, she wanted to. *Anything is better than this.*

Without warning, the spell was again lifted. But this time, it was accompanied by a loud thud and a groan of pain. Ginny cracked an eye open and saw that the Death Eater was slumped against a tree. Daphne Dressler stood over her, her eyes full of a fury that sent shivers down Ginny's back. And she had a feeling that rage wasn't caused by the fact that he had tortured a thirteen-year old.

The man got to his feet, raising his wand. Ginny's head was pounding, her body was shaking, she was sore everywhere, and she felt nauseated, but she could still see the terror in the man's eyes. Daphne struck without the warning of an incantation, and in a flash of light, the man's right forearm detached itself at the elbow. Ginny blinked, trying to keep her vision from going fuzzy, staring in morbid fascination at the events taking place in front of her.

The man backpedaled in shock, retreating from the spot where his severed limb lay, his wand still clutched in the hand's dead fingers.

He stared at Daphne as if she were some demon, an Angel of Darkness. She advanced on him, a malicious smile lighting her features. It chilled Ginny's blood.

"Not even going to put up a fight, Amycus?" she taunted, twirling her dark mahogany wand in her fingertips. "Such a quiet end for such a feared Death Eater, is it not? Perhaps I should correct that..."

She twirled her wand in an elaborate double circle, leveled it at his chest, and shrieked, "*Diripio!*"

A tornado of white magic struck Amycus Carrow in the stomach, ripping apart his flesh and exposing his ribs and innards, a spray of blood spattering the ground. . He gasped and collapsed to the ground, trying to breathe with shredded lungs. Blood began to soak the soil where he lay. Daphne's expression was as hard and cold as steel.

"It was quicker for Evan, of course, but he and you will share the same fate. Now...should I leave you to bleed out, or should I put you out of your misery?" she asked the dying man. Amycus tried to speak, but all that came out was a gurgle. Ginny's nausea increased tenfold. She squeezed her eyes shut, but Daphne's mocking taunts filled her ears.

"You are fortunate, Amycus. I am indeed feeling merciful." She paused. "Say *Hello to Evan for me, Death Eater.*"

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

Though her eyes were squeezed shut, Ginny was still nearly blinded by the intense flash of sickly green light. She might have been young, and still somewhat naïve, but she knew there was only spell that created such an effect. The Killing Curse.

She still couldn't believe what she was witnessing. She still couldn't believe that in the past ten minutes, she'd been tortured to the point of wishing for death, then been saved by the Grey Maiden, only to see Daphne, the woman that Harry adored so much, savagely murder a Death Eater, toying with her prey before she finally finished him with the Darkest of Curses.

She wanted to curl up in her mother's arms, to forget about everything she'd just experienced. She was revolted, frightened, and *fascinated* all at the same time. She knew that she would never again be able to look Daphne in the eye. *How could she do something like this?*

Slowly, carefully, she opened her eyes. Daphne was still staring at the body, an expression of distaste on her face. She spun and jogged to where Ginny lay. Getting down on one knee beside her, she asked, "Are you alright? How long did that *bastard* hold you under it?"

Ginny couldn't respond. She just wanted to get out of there, back to the safety and comfort of her Common Room.

"Ginny, open your eyes and listen to me," Daphne commanded. "I'm sorry that you had to see that, but I need to know how badly you are hurt. Can you sit up?"

Ginny glared at her as best as she could. "*How could you-*"

"*Ginny,*" Daphne interrupted her sharply. The redhead tried to push the memories back, with a degree of success.

"I hurt all over," she admitted. "He did it twice...I dunno how long."

Daphne cursed under her breath. "I'm sorry, Ginny, but I need to find Harry. I promise you that I'll be back as soon as I can. I won't leave you here any longer than necessary." She picked Ginny up and carried her about ten meters before setting her down next to a large tree, which Ginny collapsed against. "Just stay here, okay? I'll be back for you, I promise."

She drew her wand and drew a circle in the dirt, whispering several words under her breath. "This will make it easy to find you."

Ginny just nodded. Her feelings of revulsion were returning. She didn't care if Daphne left her here. She only wanted that...woman to leave.

Daphne got to her feet, took one look back at Ginny, and disappeared into the Forest.

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Harry cautiously moved through the Forest, wand out, glancing back over his shoulder every few seconds. He'd heard a scream earlier that sounded like Ginny, but he could only hope that she was alright. He had a nagging suspicion he was being followed, despite a complete lack of evidence to support that. He stopped moving and listened, but heard nothing but the wind whistling through the trees.

He was starting to regret splitting with Hermione and Ginny, and was worried sick about both of them. He was concerned for Daphne as well, but he knew she was easily capable of handling a single Death Eater. She could probably take out all three if they weren't particularly accomplished duelists. He moved his lit wand about in front of him, trying to illuminate the path in front of him. He was relieved that he hadn't encountered any magical creatures yet. He doubted the centaurs would be pleased to see him.

A noise from behind him caught his attention, and he froze, spinning around and pointing his wand back at its source. Silence. He could see nothing through the densely packed trees, and could only hope that it was just a gust of wind rustling some leaves. Still, he couldn't shake his feeling of unease.

He reached a small clearing and hurried to cover the open ground. He continued moving deeper into the forest. He'd just started to calm his racing heart when he heard a loud crash from behind him. He spun around; wand pointed straight ahead, and then dove as a massive creature lunged at him. He rolled over, searching for his attacker. He didn't have to look long.

It was enormous, almost three meters tall, with a long and sleek body covered by short gray fur. The head was mostly black, except for a slash of white across the creature's snout. Saliva dripped from the werewolf's mouth, sharp teeth glistening brightly in the moonlight.

A person less versed in wizarding history might not have noted the distinctive slash across the creature's snout. But Harry knew a great deal about the First War, and he knew that he was staring down the most infamous werewolf in modern wizarding history. A man that was

said to have become so feral that he reverted to animalistic instincts even when the moon *wasn't* full.

Harry was staring at the visage of a fully-transformed killing machine.

Fenrir Greyback.

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A/N: If you haven't noticed, I've changed the story's rating to M. It probably should have been there before, but no one complained so I kept it where it was. Between the scene with Daphne and the Hippogriff one, there is enough blood and gore in this book to make me feel the need to up the rating. I promise that I'll never write any M-rated romance in any of the seven books. That's just not my thing.

If you find yourself wanting to slap Daphne rather hard across the face...or worse, then I've done what I tried to do. She looks absolutely awful in this chapter, allowing her emotions to overcome her rational sense and letting her fixation on keeping Harry safe put his friends in danger. Yes, it was *incredibly* irresponsible of her to drag Hermione and Ginny out into a dangerous situation because she was angry with them for being so absent-minded (and remember that Harry managed to talk them out of coming with him. Harry also bought Sirius's trick because he wasn't really thinking straight. Strong emotions make people do stupid things). It was even worse for her to leave Ginny unattended. On that note, what Ginny experienced, and more importantly, witnessed, is going to have a major impact on the story. Consider Ginny's innocence a thing of the past. It doesn't mean she'll think like an adult, but she's seen the worst side of humanity. This chapter isn't really supposed to make you hate Daphne, but to understand just how screwed up she is. If you hate her, I can't blame you. She can be hard to feel sorry for sometimes.

Hermione's little problem in the forest was written both to give you a peek inside her head and to give Blaise a chance to redeem himself. I don't know if that's going to work, as some of you seem determined to hate him. Perhaps you can see now that he isn't always cold-hearted and manipulative. This is also not the beginning of a relationship between Hermione and Blaise, so please hold the pitchforks and torches. It might happen; it might not, but it won't happen now.

I know some of you will question Sirius's use of an Unforgivable. It seems to me that it isn't particularly difficult to cast an Unforgivable if you have the right emotions behind it. It's an emotion driven spell, and Sirius was desperate and desperately needed to have Harry under his control. You can see how much he hated what he was doing, hated being a hypocrite. You also see that Sirius was able to reawaken Harry's doubts about Daphne, and that might just save his life.

Despite the fact that Daphne saw Peter, she still thinks (correctly) that Sirius is trying to take Harry away from her. She knows he isn't a Death Eater, but he might as well be. So don't expect her to give him a chance to explain himself.

*Where is Dumbledore?* That's a question I guarantee a bunch of you will be asking. *How can all of these things happen without somebody noticing?* First, Dumbledore's absence will be explained, and will be important in the long run, not just a convenient plot detail. Snape isn't really concerned with where Harry and Ginny are, and assumes they are safe in the dorms. McGonagall is running the school, so she's not looking for Hermione. For all Lavender and Parvati know, she's asleep in the library.

I'm unsure of what Rowling says the case is, but I'm going by the logic that werewolves transform when the light hits them. However, because it doesn't make any sense why Remus doesn't just close the windows and hide in the dark, as a man, in this case, I'll also say that the transformation automatically occurs when the moon reaches a certain point in the sky. That's the best way I can reconcile two conflicting events.

As for the monster cliff, well, I was in a sadistic mood.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

## Chapter 19: The Power Within

Remus, as he had done for so many nights when he'd been at Hogwarts, curled up on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. The difference was, of course, that now thanks to the Wolfsbane Potion brewed by Daphne, he was now capable of conscious thought. As the damage to the room and its furnishings bore witness, this had not been the case in the past.

Remus still wondered why he chose to spend the night of the full moon inside this boarded up building. He vividly remembered each transformation, the loss of control coupled with agonizing pain, and then waking up the next day, naked and sore, his body covered in scratches and bite marks.

Perhaps it was simply that he felt uncomfortably curling up in his own office. Despite his large size while transformed, he thought he'd be able to fit comfortably if he moved a few things around. Remus, when transformed, was slightly smaller than the average werewolf, something that would have been a disadvantage had he ever considering joining a pack. Packs were groups of werewolves that met together, both in human and wolf form. Several of them existed in London, but Remus constantly fought what he was; it had been over thirty years, yet he still refused to accept that he was different than any ordinary wizard.

Sighing, Remus made a noise that came out as more of a snort, and laid his head on his forepaws. After several minutes he rolled over. Bored to death, and feeling the wolf's desire to be active and run around, he got up and began pounding through the house. He entered one of the small bedrooms on the first floor and felt his right hind leg slip on something. He regained his balance, and then sought out what had nearly caused him to lose his balance.

Even as a werewolf, Remus still gaped at what he saw. It appeared that the protection spells that James had cast on the old piece of parchment were still intact, because rather than his claws shredding the paper, it appeared untouched. Amber eyes traced over the familiar lines of the Marauder's Map. In Seventh Year, James had expanded it so that it showed Hogwarts only when a person was

inside the castle. When they were on the grounds, it displayed the grounds. Outside of that, it defaulted back to Hogwarts. He'd needed Lily's help for that trick.

But as he examined the relic of his past in utter astonishment, he realized that there were a number of labeled people on the Grounds. Specifically, they were in and around the Forbidden Forest. Remus frowned, though as he looked closer, he at first suspected it was some students on a dare. He was *partially* right.

His eyes fixated on each name, his incredulity growing with each one he read.

*Harry Potter*

*Daphne Dressler*

*Hermione Granger*

*Ginevra Weasley*

*Blaise Zabini*

*Alecto Carrow*

*Amicus Carrow*

*Padfoot*

As shocked and alarmed as he was by the last name he saw, located on the edge of the Forest, there was still one more surprise. *It's impossible!* Remus thought. But there it was:

*Wormtail*

*Wormtail, Remus thought, Peter!*

Remembering the other names he had seen, he quickly examined the location of each person. Deep within the forest, three names were clustered closely together: *Ginevra...Ginny Weasley, Daphne Dressler, and Amicus Carrow.* As Remus watched, the banner bearing the Death Eater's name suddenly vanished. Remus felt his

blood chill. Only two things caused that to happen. One would of course be when the person left the area covered by the Map...but you couldn't Apparate in the Forest. The other frighteningly obvious solution to this problem, was, of course, that Daphne Dressler had just taken revenge against one of her husband's killers. *Poor Ginny*, Remus thought.

Next, his eyes found a pair of dots moving towards the edge of the Forest, almost on top of one another. It was Hermione Granger and Blaise Zabini, the latter a Slytherin boy that Remus didn't know much about. What was he doing out this late at night? And why were he and Hermione heading away from the action?

Remus scanned the map for Harry. He was alone, near the edge of the map, about probably a half-kilometer from the edge of the Forest. Then he noticed another banner, one that had appeared at the edge of the Map and was making rapid progress towards Harry. *Fenrir Greyback*.

Remus growled loudly. Greyback was one of the most fearsome and inhuman werewolves to ever live, and could be rightly blamed for poisoning the reputations of werewolves as a whole. He was a mercenary that claimed alliance to the others of his species, but was more of a thug, often receiving money from back-stabbing pureblood families to attack the members of rival families. After the rise of Voldemort, Greyback had unexpectedly sworn fealty to the new Dark Lord, along with the rest of his clan. Most of those werewolves had been mercilessly hunted down and exterminated during the war, but Fenrir had escaped capture on three occasions, Biting four Aurors in the process.

And now he was going after Harry. A fire had been lit inside Remus's lupine body. He would *not* allow Harry to suffer as he did. He deserved far better than that.

Filled with a near-murderous rage that his wolf responded to enthusiastically, Remus ran over to one of the walls, and with one swipe of his claws, tore apart the carpet covering the Marauder's emergency escape tunnel. He had to squeeze his body

uncomfortably, but he made it through. He ran for the Forest, not caring if anyone saw him.

No one did.

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Harry knew the instant that he loosed the Slicing Curse that it was to no avail. The sliver of white light struck the werewolf directly in the chest, but he might as well have been casting a Levitation Charm at a brick wall for all the good in did. Harry dove headfirst towards the ground, and Greyback missed him again, through the claws on his hind legs missed Harry's face by about four centimeters.

The werewolf snarled at him, spittle flying. He lunged again, and Harry dove again. Greyback didn't miss altogether this time, and his clawed hind legs traced fire over Harry's back. He could feel warmth running down his back, but knew the injuries weren't as serious as they felt. He also knew that he wasn't in danger of contracting Lycanthropy; only the saliva of a werewolf entering the victim's blood stream could transmit the curse.

Still, it hurt. Harry held his wand out in front of him, even thought he knew it was a pointless gesture. His mind was racing as he tried to figure out how to escape this predicament. It'd be near impossible to outrun the creature through the densely wooded forest. He had no idea where Daphne was, and even if he did, he didn't know what else she could do...save use the Killing Curse. But as he dodged another attack by the werewolf, who seemed content to toy with him until he made a mistake or tired, that alternative was beginning to look very appealing. And it wasn't as though Greyback hadn't earned it.

Greyback found the range. Distracted by thoughts of escape, Harry was violently hammered to the ground onto his back. The werewolf looking down on him howled, then drew back to strike, teeth glistening in the moonlight. In desperation, Harry loosed a burst of raw power upward. It worked, hitting Greyback in the midsection and knocking him off of Harry. Harry rolled away, fumbling for his wand and trying to get to his feet. He thought he might have more time to fire another burst of magic, though he was already feeling drained. Daphne had warned him that this might happen, that no matter how

powerful he could be, he needed to learn to be efficient, or he'd burn himself out. And if he exhausted his magical reserves, he'd have no chance.

Unfortunately, Greyback wasn't tiring, and he charged again. Harry felt the werewolf's fore claws catch and cut through his thin robes into the flesh of his right arm. He bit back a scream from the agony that accompanied it. He had to keep himself from panicking. Lycanthropy might not be transmittable through claws, but there was *something* in the claws that made his wounds burn. He rolled over, trying to get to his feet. His left hand was clenched over his right shoulder, trying to stop the bleeding. Blood seeped through his fingers and dripped to the ground.

Greyback came again and Harry managed to escape unscathed, except that the werewolf was backing him towards a particularly dense cluster of trees. He was toying with Harry, giving him the illusion of being able to escape. Harry couldn't remember feeling this frightened and helpless in his life. Even with Riddle he'd been able to fight back, albeit in vain. But against Greyback, Harry couldn't hurt his opponent with conventional magic, and he certainly couldn't win a physical confrontation. Thoughts flashed through his mind about what it would be like to spend the rest of his life as Remus did, fearing the part of him that emerged once a month. Wolfsbane could only do so much, and he'd lose the respect of most of wizard kind. The Wizarding World wasn't kind to werewolves, and they wouldn't take kindly to be *led* by one. All of his ambitions and hopes were about to be dashed against those trees that were growing steadily closer to his back.

Suddenly, there was another howl from close by, and Harry watched in silent disbelief as a second werewolf bounded out of the trees, slamming full force into Greyback and knocking him to the ground. Though he didn't have any distinguishing marks, a glance into the newcomer's amber eyes, filled with protectiveness and rage, told him everything he needed to know.

*Remus.*

Harry watched like a spectator as the werewolves circled one another, biting and clawing, barking like rabid dogs. The two attacked at the same time, colliding with one another and becoming one large flurry of arms and legs. There were cries of pain and rage from both, but finally, Greyback used his stronger frame to hurl Remus off of him. Remus was limping, and his right foreleg was bleeding badly, but as Harry watched, the wound began to shrink, finally disappearing altogether. Only a patch of bloody fur marked where it once was. He knew that werewolves had accelerated healing rates, but this was still remarkable.

Remus howled, and then locked eyes with Harry. Somehow he knew what the man wanted. *Leave. Go. Run!* He seemed to shout in Harry's mind.

Snarling and howling loudly, Remus attacked again. His intent was clear; he was trying to occupy Greyback to give Harry a chance to escape. Harry took that chance, running out of the clear and back into the woods, relying on nothing but instinct to figure out which direction he was heading. Perhaps he was homing in on the immense magical power of Hogwarts; he didn't know. He kept running, jumping over trees and rocks that blocked his path. More than once he had to dodge around a tree that appeared unexpectedly from the impenetrable darkness.

Finally, he saw what looked like the end of the Forest. He ran out of it and emerged onto a large field that ran down towards the rocky shore of the lake. In the distance, down by the lake, he *felt* fluctuations of power. But he saw *nothing*. *Obscuring Charm*, he thought. He considered running up to Hogwarts and alerting Dumbledore, but decided that Sirius might already be dead by that point. Harry didn't like the man at all, *hated* him, in fact, for controlling him as he had, but that didn't mean he deserved to *die*. Not when he was innocent of the crimes he was accused of.

He ran down toward the shore and felt the now-familiar tingle of magic as he passed through the Charm, and now could clearly see Daphne and Sirius dueling, flashes of light from blocked and deflected curses illuminating the area around them. Daphne appeared to have the upper edge, as she doing most of the attacking.

Sirius was trying to fend her off, maybe hoping she'd drain herself before she had a chance to kill him.

As he'd expected, Daphne sensed his approach. "Finish him, Harry," she yelled, firing a pair of *Sectumsempra* Slashing Curses at Black. When he hesitated, she screamed, her voice chilling and dark "*Finish him! He's the one that murdered Lily and James!*"

"You don't *understand!*" Harry yelled back, hurrying down towards them. "He's *innocent!*" Well, of least of that charge, Harry thought. He was quite *guilty* of trying to take Harry away from Daphne's care.

"What are you *talking* about?" she demanded, her voice almost drowned out by a strange wind that was now howling around the combatants.

"He didn't betray them, *Peter* did! He's *alive!*" Harry cried back at her. He saw Sirius smiled, but it was short-lived as he had to block another wave of curses from Daphne.

Daphne's response was shocking. "I *know* that he is!" she screamed. "I saw him. But this *monster* drove him into the Death Eater's camp!"

Harry gaped in disbelief. She knew that Pettigrew was alive, and yet she still seemed as determined as ever to kill Sirius. And she was winning now, as Sirius recoiled, hit by several curses. There was a bloody gash across his forehead, and his left arm hung limply at his side. Daphne continued her assault, driving him back toward the water with a barrage of Bone-Shattering Curse aimed at Black's head. "But he's *innocent!*" Harry screamed. "*Stop! For the Love of Merlin STOP!*"

"You don't..." Daphne began in between yet another barrage of Dark Magic, and then trailed off. Her body stiffened, and Harry began to feel an unnatural chill in the air. The temperature was dropping drastically, and Harry watched in horror and disbelief as the water of the lake began to freeze over.

The howling winds picked up, swirling around the trio and chilling Harry's bones.

*Dementors.*

They swarmed down around the three of them en masse, circling them, diving towards them, penning them in. Daphne raised her wand and screamed the incantation for the Patronus Charm, but the hysterical, frightened tone of her voice let Harry know that it was no use. A thin, useless cloud of grey magic spouted from the wand, blackening and fading into nothingness almost as quickly. Sirius was already on his knees, bawling like a child. Daphne looked terrified, helpless. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly.

That was all Harry saw before his own nightmares and memories began to assault him. It was a kaleidoscopic vision of a dozen memories at once, with sounds from his dark past filling his ears. His knees touched the ground as he struggled to control himself. It was a losing battle. His memories overwhelmed him, fear and despair washing over him and smothering his hope like a wet blanket. Even his anger and rage were extinguished.

His magic pounded at its barriers, both Daphne's and his own, hungry to escape.

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*The Village of Hogsmeade burned. The cacophony of screams, explosions, and cries of pain, outrage, and sorrow swirled together, becoming an incomprehensible babbling. Students ran in every direction, many of them injured or helping injured classmates. Bodies were strewn everywhere, though most were those of the actual villagers. But quite a few of the black-robed corpses strewn in grotesque positions bore the Crest of one of the House of Hogwarts.*

*Inside this scene of confusion and chaos, a sixteen-year old Daphne O'Connor advanced, wand drawn, eyes searching for any sign of danger. Most her age might have run, but they hadn't been through what Daphne had. She was not still there because she wanted to help people, although the thought did enter her mind as screams broke out in the distance: She wanted revenge.*

*Daphne exited one alleyway into an eerily silent square. The streets were covered with the rubble of destroyed buildings, and Daphne could see at least two buildings. Then she saw a black-robed, hooded*

*figure crouching down next to a pile of rubble in the center of the square. He had noticed her approach, and as he turned toward her, rising to his feet. His eyes, light blue, found hers and widened in surprise. The Ravenclaw Prefect struck.*

*The Slicing Curse she fired wasn't intended to do be fatal. Daphne had hoped to simply take down the Death Eater, or injure him so that she could escape. Despite her ordeal of the past year, she was not yet capable of defeating an experienced servant of the Dark Lord.*

*Regardless of her intent, the sliver of silver light struck the Death Eater square in the chest. His expression of confusion turned to agony. The world seemed to slow, as a spray of crimson erupted. He fell backward, eyes rolling back into his skull. His body crumpled, falling off the pile of rubble and hitting the ground with a soft thump below her field of vision. She stood there, wand aimed at the point where the man had disappeared, waiting for him to re-appear and counter-attack. But she heard no movement, nor saw any sign of the man moving.*

*Slowly, cautiously, checking in every direction, she walked towards the body. She went around the pile of rubble and aimed her wand at the man lying there. He was motionless and his face was covered by his hood. She nudged the man's arm with her trainer, but he didn't stir. It suddenly occurred to her that the man was dead.*

*That she had killed him.*

*Almost involuntarily, she bent down and used her wand to lift the hood away from the dead man's face. She froze in horror as it came into view.*

*He had soft features, light brown hair cut short, and only a trace of facial hair.*

*He wasn't a man at all. He was a boy.*

*She stepped back, aghast. He couldn't have been much older than her, if even that.*

*She had just killed someone.*

*She closed her eyes, fighting the nausea that threatened to overwhelm her. The mere sight of the body brought back memories she didn't want to remember. Memories of her parents, of her brother. The brutal and ruthless way in which they had been killed. Memories that still haunted her dreams at night while at the same time she tried to combat them with Occlumency.*

*With those thoughts, more memories began to flash by, violent and frightening nightmares; some of them real, some of them imagined. But they were brief, fleeting. They left deep impressions, but they did not linger before being replaced in her mind's eye. But her thoughts were still of the memory that had haunted her for years, the memory that she thought she had banished forever.*

*Daphne fell.*

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*His mother was straight out of a nightmare. The rational part of Sirius's mind might have told him that his parents weren't nearly as decayed and grotesque at the time of the memory he was witnessing, but Dementors didn't allow for much rational thought.*

*Black's sallow, sunken skin and malicious, contorted expression only added to the fright that Sirius was feeling, both now and at the time. Her mouth was open wide in a furious shriek of anger.*

**“YOU ARE A DISGRACE TO THIS FAMILY! YOU ASSOCIATE WITH MUDBLOODS, DIRTY THE REPUTATION OF THE ANCIENT AND MOST NOBLE HOUSE OF BLACK! I CURSE THE DAY YOU SPRUNG FROM MY WOMB!”** she roared. Sirius half expected her to start breathing fire. **“YOU ARE NOT MY SON! REGULUS, WHO HAS STAYED LOYAL TO THE FAMILY TRADITIONS, HE IS MY SON!”**

*A fifteen-year old Sirius Black, wide blue eyes shining out from behind lanky black hair that fell down into his eyes, recoiled in shock, catching part of his robes on the base supporting a priceless vase. His sudden movement jolted it, and it fell to the ground, smashing into hundreds of ceramic shards. His mother, if it was possible, grew more furious. She shrieked incoherently, pointing an accusing finger that seemed to Sirius as if it would stab through his gut. He backpedaled again. He had had fights with his mother before, but it had never*

*been this bad. They hadn't had a loving relationship since Sirius was very young, but she'd usually just yelled a bit and banished him to his room. It was boring, but it was tolerable.*

*"Mother," Sirius began, trying to be as respectful as possible. Calling her "Mum" would probably only make it worse. "I'm not really that interested in her...that Daphne O'Connor..."*

***"I DON'T CARE IF YOU ARE NOT INTERESTED IN THE MUDBLOOD! THE POINT IS THAT YOU WERE SEEN WITH THAT...THAT...HARLOT!"*** she screamed. ***"REGULUS WAS DISGRACED!"***

*Sirius's fear turned to rage. Yes, Helena Frates was Muggleborn, but she was also intelligent, very attractive, and a very nice girl. She was the third girl he'd gone out with this year, but his mother hadn't been more than slightly annoyed with the last two. Of course, both had been from pureblood families, albeit not affluent ones.*

***"O'CONNOR'S FAMILY IS AN ENEMY OF OURS!"*** she continued. ***"YOU WILL STAY AWAY FROM HER, OR YOU WILL SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES!"***

*Sirius nodded hurriedly. "Okay, I will. I'll keep to purebloods, and ones you don't have a problem with. I'm sorry for upsetting you." The situation seemed to be under control. Then his father's voice boomed from behind him.*

*"What happened to the vase, boy?" he demanded. "You broke it, didn't you? DIDN'T YOU? YOU CLUMSY OAF!"*

*"I'm sorry," Sirius said, though he wasn't sure if he meant it. "I'll clean it up so you can get it repaired..."*

***"FOOLISH IDIOT! IT CANNOT BE REPAIRED! THAT IS WHY IT IS VALUABLE! IT IS BROKEN FOREVER!"*** He roared. ***"I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF YOU! YOU ARE A DISGRACE TO MY NAME! GET OUT, AND DON'T COME BACK!"***

*Sirius stared at him in shock. They were disowning him, throwing him out. They threatened to do it for as long as he could remember, but*

*cooler heads always prevailed. Not this time. He turned to his mother, desperation in his eyes. He hated his family, but they still gave him a place to eat, live, and sleep. He felt no brotherly love for Regulus, but his resentment was more for the way he was treated in comparison to him than it was for the kind of person he was.*

*His mother seemed to swell past her normal size. Her hand came out of nowhere, striking him across the face, the force of the blow knocking him to the ground. “DON’T BEG, YOU WRETCH! THIS HAS BEEN A LONG TIME IN COMING!”*

*“Please...” Sirius pleaded. His father didn’t respond. What he did do was grab him by the collar of his robes, pick him up with surprising ease, and drag him towards the door. He kicked it open and hurled Sirius out onto the street. A minute later, his trunk followed. The door slammed shut behind him.*

*Sirius got up, staring around like a lost child. “What am I going to do?” he asked himself. Deciding that he needed to find a place to stay, he began walking. James would be happy to have him, if not permanently, than at least for tonight. He needed a fireplace.*

*He took one last glance back at Grimmauld Place, tears blurring his vision.*

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They say that when a human being is threatened, basic animal instincts of survival or retribution, the so-called ‘fight or flight’ complex, are activated deep within the brain. The same pertains to wizards. No matter how different they might be from Muggles, they had all evolved from the same stock.

And as the Dementors closed in, one of them hauling Daphne Dressler up with a bony hand towards its mouth, ready to administer the fatal Dementor’s Kiss, to suck the Grey Maiden’s blackened and twisted soul out of her, and a second and third Dementor moved towards her ward and the man she had only recently been trying to kill, Harry’s magic responded. The Darkness attempted to consume it, smothering it with fear and cold. Like an animal defending its turf to the very end, Harry’s magic lashed out, sending lighting bolts of raw

power coursing through Harry's body, flashing out from his very skin. It lit the air around the trio of fallen figures, and several students at Hogwarts, especially those of pureblood families, were awoken suddenly. On the steps leading to the main entrance of Hogwarts, Blaise Zabini's head spun around, staring back into the darkness for a sign of what had caused the disturbance. Hermione gave him a questioning look, but he blinked and they continued toward the Hospital Wing.

Down near the lake, the Dementors drew back, almost frightened by the power before them. But then it stopped, and Harry's body lay still. They advanced again, the lead one changing course from Daphne to the more powerful Boy-Who-Lived and his potent soul.

It had also long been said that *nothing* can kill a Dementor. Most powerful curses have no effect or are rendered ineffective; as is the case with the *Avada Kedavra* Killing Curse, by the fact that Dementor are not truly alive, and thus *cannot* be killed. That said, no wizard has been able to permanently vanquish a Dementor or destroy it outright. Even the Patronus Charm could only repulse a Dementor; drive it away altogether if it was corporeal and powerful enough.

But as the Dementors closed on Harry's crumpled form, that small fact was about to change. Without warning, there was a tremendous flash, and the Dementors flinched back once more. But this time, Harry's body rose into the air, his limbs limp and lolling, held up only by his own magic. Then his mouth and eyes opened. His eyes, normally emerald green, now pulsing white, was a look into the face of power.

A shockwave emanating from Harry raced outward, ripping the water of the lake and sending Dementors hurtling in all direction. Like the detonation of nuclear weapon, the shockwave of white light was immediately followed by a sheet of magical fire, setting the very air alight and scorching the Dementors unable to get clear. They shrieked, a kind of blood-chilling howl that filled the night air. Then came the final surge.

Though the bodies of the wizard and witch were miraculously protected from the power surge, the white blast of energy consumed

everything within a hundred-meter radius. At least half the Dementors were *obliterated*, vanishing in a cloud of superheated magical particles. This was *power*.

The remaining Dementors scattered and fled, racing away as fast as they could from the inferno of magic that had just consumed many of their brethren.

Harry's body drifted gently to the ground as if it was a feather in a light breeze. His skin was unblemished, though his skin and robes were heavy with perspiration from the release of immensely powerful magic. He was drained, and barely aware as he faded back into unconsciousness.

But across the grounds, dozens of students, most them purebloods jerked awake and stared around, searching for the source of the powerful magic that had disturbed their sleep.

And far away from the environs of the castle, in the sitting room of a family manor in Cornwall, England, a wizard with close-cut blonde hair and icy blue eyes sat upright in his chair. Then he smiled, pleased. He'd been *right*.

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Daphne's eyes snapped open, and she rolled over, trying to get to her feet. She felt unnaturally weak, and images began flashing through her mind's eyes. Adrenaline flooded her veins, and she had enough strength to sit up, albeit while leaning on one hand. She ignored the feelings of weakness and her sore body and glanced around, groping around for her wand. She didn't find it.

Then she turned towards the lake and found her dark mahogany and blue phoenix feather wand pointed directly at her face. The other end of it was being held by Sirius Black, who looked weak and unsteady, but despite his shaking hand, his resolve was clear. "Was wondering if you were going to wake up," he remarked. "Now, we need to talk."

Daphne ignored him as she suddenly remembered how they had arrived, battered and exhausted, on the shore of the lake. Her eyes traced across the sky, but there were no Dementors to be found. She searched for Harry frantically, and caught sight of him on his back.

His chest rose and fell in a more-or-less regular rhythm, and she exhaled in relief. Her relief didn't last long as she remembered where she was. She blinked in confusion. She normally wasn't one to lose track of where they were.

*But what had happened? Where were the Dementors? Why hadn't they all been Kissed?*

"Black," she spat roughly. "What happened?"

The lanky-haired man shrugged. "Dunno, but I think Harry had something to do with it." With that thought, Daphne suddenly sensed the aura of Harry's magic all around them. It was amazingly potent, and her magical senses were intoxicated by it. She shook her head, trying to clear it. In the back of her mind, it occurred to her that she didn't sense Riddle's stench. That puzzled her, but she had other problems.

"What do you want?" she demanded, leaning back on both hands now. Her fatigue was catching up to her. She knew she had expended a lot of energy fighting Black and the Death Eaters in the Forest, and that the Dementors would have sucked her reserves dry by their very presence. She'd *always* been vulnerable to Dementors; she couldn't remember the last successful Patronus she had cast. She thought it took the form of a bird of some sort, but it had faded too quickly for her to be sure. And that had been in the environment of a classroom.

"I want to take Harry with me," Sirius said. Daphne stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. He didn't seem willing to use that wand, and she was going to make him pay for it. She lunged forward, tackling him and hammering her elbow down into his neck. The blow wasn't hard enough to knock him unconscious, and he managed to throw her off of him. But she had reclaimed her wand. They lay there, panting, each trying to summon enough strength to fight the other.

"Daphne," Sirius finally panted. "This is pointless. You're armed; I'm armed, and we're both exhausted. Just here me out...how 'bout you lose Legilimency to verify that I'm telling the truth, okay? I don't want to fight you, besides the fact that I know I'd lose."

Daphne met his eyes, and extended her mental tendrils into his mind. This was something that didn't require a great deal of effort, especially for one that took so well to the Mind Art, as difficult as it had been for her to learn Occlumency from Dumbledore. She'd still been struggling with the haunting memories of what had happened to her family, and been plagued by vivid and horrifying nightmares. But she'd taken naturally to Legilimency, the more offensive version. She went directly for the memory she wanted, the memory of Lily and James' death. She watched as the night unfolded, events flashing by. She felt complete and utter shock. He was telling the truth. He was innocent. Unwilling to believe she'd been so deceived, she delved deeper. She found nothing but genuine pain and feelings of loss whenever she found a memory of Sirius learning about the death of an Order member she suspected had been betrayed. Then, she searched out his feelings for Harry. This love and protectiveness rivaled her own.

*But he wants to take him from you, a mental voice reminded her. He tried to kidnap Harry right out of Hogwarts. He used an Unforgivable on him.*

*But so have I...*

She withdrew from Sirius's mind, and found herself staring into his blue eyes. She'd always thought they were somewhat cute during her school days, but the personality behind them revolted her. Now, those eyes were empty and hollow, as if the Dementors had already sucked out his Soul. His body was ravaged by malnutrition and muscle atrophy from being imprisoned in Azkaban.

"You're telling the truth," she said. "You are innocent of the crimes you were imprisoned for." She paused. "But that's not all."

Sirius sighed. "Daph, take a look at yourself, look at what you've become. You can't even defend your actions as fighting against the Darkness. You were ready to kill me without even bothering to find out if I was innocent!"

"You didn't exactly behave like an innocent man," Daphne told him. "I erred in judgment. I'm sorry for that. But there is one thing you are guilty of, and that is trying to take my son away from me."

Sirius blinked “Son?”

Daphne glared at him, but her exhaustion diluted the effect somewhat. “*Think, Black.* Edmond and I were childless. What *else* I am I supposed to call Harry?” she said sharply.

“But look at what he is!” Sirius demanded. “He’s a *Slytherin*, for one, and...”

Daphne laughed at him. It was weak, but laced with derision. “Is *that* was this is all about? That your Godson has become what you hated most? I’m proud of Harry, Sirius. He has been a credit to that House, and learned skills he will need in the future. If he’d been a Gryffindor or a Ravenclaw, I might have to do some additional teaching.”

Sirius gaped at her. “You *approve...*”

“I *married* a Slytherin, Black,” she reminded him. “They didn’t *all* turn out as Death Eaters. And neither will this batch. They are a few sons that will *undoubtedly* take to their father’s sides, but there are a number of *interesting* cases who might go either way. The Greengrasses and the Zabinis are two that I am interested in.”

“You’re using him as a tool,” Black said in disbelief. “Using him to gain allies for a war you don’t even know is coming.”

Again, Daphne threw back her head and laughed weakly. “This isn’t about *me*, Black. This is about *Harry*. The war is coming; there is *no* doubt of *that*. I have *foreseen* it.”

Black scoffed. “So now you claim to be a Seer? Come on, Daph...”

“There are *other* ways,” she reminded him, “to see the events to come. And I know that this is the beginning. By next summer, the war will have begun. And *that* is what I am preparing Harry for. Because *he* will be the one to lead the Light to victory. He cannot *afford* to fail. *That* is his destiny, Black, and it has already been set in motion. His ordeal in the Chamber,” she continued, trying not to choke up from the memories of what she had done, “cost him much, but he also gained what he needed. *Power. Experience* of what it is like to be betrayed and stabbed in the back. A leader cannot be too trusting.

Dumbledore *is*, and that was his downfall. Without Lily's sacrifice, we would have lost the war."

"*Other ways*," Sirius said in a slightly high voice. "You mean *Dark ways!*" he snarled. "Ways involving the *sacrifice* of blood, flesh, and magic!"

Daphne unconsciously rubbed her left forearm. She'd found it none-too-coincidental that the potion had called for flesh and blood from that area. It was where Voldemort Marked his Death Eaters. Obviously, it had some kind of special significance in the annals of Dark Magic. The wound hadn't healed properly, no matter what she had done, and she now had an ugly scar roughly in the shape of a circle, but crossed by jagged lines. She knew she needed to keep it hidden, as it resembled a Dark Mark from afar. She was repulsed by the thought, but what she had done might save Harry's life. He was safe now, and that was all that mattered.

She smiled at Sirius, and then nodded. "I am sworn to keep him alive. I will use all means at my disposal. Did your parents once do much the same thing?"

Sirius glared at her. "They hired someone to see the future of their fortune. My father was quite angry."

"Probably because it ends up with you," Daphne reasoned. "If Regulus is truly dead, then you are the rightful heir. Blood rules all. Bellatrix and Narcissa have no claim to the fortune," she explained to him. "Even if they did disown you, you were still born a Black."

"I don't want their dirty money," Sirius snapped.

Daphne shrugged. "Very well."

Sirius seemed to be struggling with his emotions. "You'll *destroy* him," he told her. "You're *falling*, Daphne, if you haven't fallen *already*. And you are either going to drag him down with you, or he's going to be broken when he loses you...either way, he will pay the price."

Daphne's eyes blazed with fury. "How *dare* you, Black? He wouldn't last four minutes in battle with you. You are *obsessed* with giving him

a childhood, a childhood that was a pipe dream to begin with. He had one, but it ended far too early.”

“So you’re saying he’s an adult?” Sirius asked, his voice faint.

Daphne continued to glare at him, his earlier remark still eating at her. “Of course not. But he’s closer than most his age. His relative inexperience tends to make him...impulsive, even for a Slytherin. It’s to my relief that he’s in an environment that discourages that trait. He’s ambitious and proud, and that both aids him and hurts him at times. He still has a great deal of mental development left, and I think he feels he needs to prove himself as worthy of all the praise heaped upon him.”

“He’s not like James at all, is he?” Sirius said, sounding defeated. “I can’t even reconcile that the boy you are talking about is his son. He doesn’t even sound like Lily. He sounds like you,” he said accusingly.

Daphne didn’t blink. “Perhaps...though I wasn’t like that at his age. It came later for me, after my parents...” she closed her eyes, then reopened them. “He will become what he needs to be, Sirius. And that will be my greatest legacy.”

“As if you know...” Sirius began, then trailed off. “Of course you *know*. You only performed a *Dark Ritual* to find out.”

Daphne nodded. “But that’s not why we’re still talking.” She paused, considering her words. “You have two choices, Black. Either you leave and find a place to hide and contact Dumbledore. Or we go up to the castle right now, with me ostensibly guarding you, and contact him there. Harry stays with me either way.”

“That’s not fair,” Sirius insisted. “James told me to take care of him.”

“He doesn’t need you,” Daphne interrupted him, smiling slightly. “You don’t *understand* him. Until you show me a court order from the Wizengamot that instructs me to turn Harry over to you, he stays with me. And seeing as you are a convicted criminal, I’m not that concerned about that. I won’t tell you to stay away from him, even though that’s what I feel you should do. But if you push too hard, you will suffer the consequences. Get up, and make your decision.”

Her strength was returning, and she managed to get to her feet. She levitated Harry's body and took it into her arms. She checked his pulse, and found it erratic, but strong. He was magically exhausted. She wondered absently what exactly had happened to the Dementors.

Cradling his form in her arms, Daphne then turned to face Sirius. "Your choice," she told him.

Sirius stared deep into her eyes, and Daphne felt a twinge of regret for being as cruel as she was being. But that didn't mean she felt sorry for him. "Fine. I'll leave. But I need transportation."

Daphne smiled. "Ah, I know just the thing." Shifting Harry in her arms, she aimed her wand in the general direction of the school. "*Accio Firebolt!*" she cried.

"What are you..?" Sirius spluttered. "That was my *gift*!"

"And he doesn't *need* it," Daphne reminded him. "You, on the other hand, will find a use for it."

A minute later, the broom came hurtling through the night sky, stopping directly in front of her. "Your transportation," she told him. Then she turned her back on him and began walking toward the school. She'd get Harry to the Hospital Wing, then find Ginny and Hermione.

She'd already walked about a quarter of the way back when she heard the 'whoosh' of Sirius departing. She smiled grimly. He'd made the right choice. If he had come with her, and they had encountered Snape, Daphne wasn't sure if she would have tried to stop the ex-Death Eater or not.

Speak of the devil...a black-robed figure was hurtling down the path towards the Forest. She whistled loudly, and he turned. "*Dressler?*" he snarled. He eyed Harry's body in her arms, then scanned her face for confirmation that he was alive. "Where is the Weasley girl?"

"In the Forest," she replied immediately. "She's hurt, was hit with the Cruciatus. I had to leave her to stop Black."

"And what became of him?" Snape demanded suspiciously.

Daphne smiled. "It turns out we were wrong, Severus. He was innocent. I sent him on his way."

Snape snarled incoherently. "And you don't think it could *possibly* have been a *trick*?"

Daphne scoffed. "Sirius hasn't been able to outsmart me yet, Snape. I confirmed his story with Legilimency. He's telling the truth."

Snape nodded stiffly. He knew Daphne's proficiency in the Mind Art. "Very well. Where can I find Weasley?"

"She has a Tracking Charm on her," Daphne explained. "Look for that."

Snape nodded and headed past her. *Good thing Black left when I told him to*, she thought. *Guilty or not, Snape wouldn't have shown him mercy.*

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Daphne leaned back against the wall, covering her mouth as she yawned. She was sitting on one of the beds in the Hogwarts Hospital Wing, watching over her ward and his friends. Harry was asleep, recovering from a case of extreme magical exhaustion. Ginny was recovering from exposure to the Cruciatus Curse. It didn't appear as though she would suffer any permanent damage, except to her psyche.

Daphne had first experienced the Cruciatus Curse during the siege of Hogwarts, hit while making a stupid and ill-thought-out charge towards a line of advancing Death Eaters to give some of her Ravenclaw classmates a chance to get out of the way. Not only had she been taken down without having a chance to fire a single spell, but four Aurors had come to their aid, driving back the Death Eaters and leaving one dead in their wake. She'd rolled around on the ground, panting, before an Auror had picked her up and taken her to the overcrowded Hospital Wing. She'd been out for the rest of the battle, as she'd also suffered a badly sprained ankle that went

untreated for several hours. The battle itself hadn't lasted much longer.

Dumbledore had finally harnessed the power of the wards to create a conflagration that consumed most of the Army of Darkness. It had been Voldemort's last major offensive, and the rest of the war had been fought as a series of skirmishes and small battles. The Order and the Aurors lost the majority of them, and popular opinion was turning against the government, who the populous accused of being cowardly and incompetent. Voldemort had been on the verge of fracturing the wizarding world when he'd gone after the Potters.

She took a deep breath, drawing her knees closer to her chest, shaking her hair out of her eyes. She didn't want to think about that. Her eyes traced over the sleeping form of Harry's other friend, Hermione. She'd been taken into the Hospital Wing by none other than Blaise Zabini, unable to walk because of a badly broken leg. Madam Pomfrey had healed it quickly, and Daphne had thanked Blaise. The pureblood boy had been a bit taken aback by that, probably awed by being in her *presence*.

Daphne didn't concern herself with such things. She had enough weaknesses without adding arrogance and conceit to the list. Still, she had made an impression, even without meaning to.

The doors to the Hospital Wing swung open, but Daphne didn't move, expecting the Hogwarts Matron. Instead, Albus Dumbledore walked in, followed by Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape. Daphne was off the bed and to her feet in one motion, glaring at Dumbledore.

The old wizard raised his hands. "I am sure you wish to know where I was," he began.

"You've got that right," Daphne snapped back. "I also want to know how three Death Eaters got onto the School grounds. And why I had to fight them and Black at the same time." She smiled bitterly, "He's innocent, at least of betraying Lily and James, by the way."

Dumbledore nodded. "I know," he said in a tired voice. "Severus informed me. I must apologize to him for the mistake we all made. I hope he will contact me so that I can arrange a place for him to stay.

Unfortunately, it will not be possible to convince Fudge to have him exonerated, at least not without a formal proceeding. And I fear for Sirius's life. A mistake like that is not one easily admitted."

Daphne nodded. Politicians hated to admit mistakes, and this mistake might ruin the careers of several men, not the least of which was the former Head of Magical Law Enforcement, Barty Crouch, who had authorized not only the use of Unforgivables on suspects but also the incarceration of prisoners without a full trial. At the time, with panic consuming the populous, such measures were needed and well-received. Not only would Sirius's individual case damage Fudge's reputation, but others might come forward, claiming similar injustices. The precedent established by Sirius's exoneration might start the ball rolling on complete political turnover.

"Where were you?" Daphne asked, realizing he'd never actually answered her question the first time it was asked.

Dumbledore smiled mysteriously. "Meeting with an old friend...a very old friend. He's been researching Ancient Magic in the Middle East...and discovered a number of intriguing things. Things that may be able to aid Harry in controlling his magic."

Daphne's anger evaporated. The control of Harry's power was the most important thing right now, his safety excluded. He needed to be able to manage his abilities without risking his own health or the health of others. Right now, Harry could only use his magic in bursts, and he couldn't keep exhausting himself. He was running out of time. Maybe whatever this friend of Dumbledore's had discovered might help.

"I must apologize, Daphne," Minerva said. "I was attending the Wards, and was unaware of the events transpiring in the Forest. Albus," she said, nodding to the elderly wizard, "has been teaching me to control them, in case I need to replace him. I believed that I wouldn't be needed tonight, and I was wrong."

"Nonetheless," Dumbledore said, interrupting her, "you did an admirable job, Daphne. Harry and his friends are safe, thanks to you."

Daphne shook her head. "No. The Dementors...overwhelmed me. Harry drove them off. I don't know how, but he did. He saved all of us." She glanced back at his sleeping form. "He saved all of us," she repeated, still awed by what he had done.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled brightly. "Then he has taken his first steps along the long path he needs to travel."

"He also woke up about half of Slytherin House," Snape added. "All of them were purebloods."

"A magical burst can be easily detected by those attuned to magic. Muggleborns and Half-Bloods aren't as sensitive when it comes to detecting magic. It is only a matter of time before the entire school knows what transpired," Dumbledore explained.

"And then what?" Daphne asked. "Will he be feared, resented? Or will he be respected?"

Dumbledore shrugged. "Some of both, I imagine. But I believe for many, Harry Potter will become more than The-Boy-Who-Lived."

"It pains me to speak this way of a child," Minerva cut in, "but I agree with Albus. Based upon what he told me, it is certainly a positive thing that Mr. Potter will gain attention for how powerful he is. I believe that many think of him as a merely a celebrity, famous for something he did as a child, but not an abnormally powerful wizard. It will be good for him to change that perception."

Daphne nodded in agreement with Minerva's wisdom. She had hoped, she had *tried* to give Harry a childhood, to let him enjoy the younger years of his life, but it simply hadn't been meant to be. Harry's life was in constant turmoil, and he was growing up quickly. She glanced over at him again, smiling grimly. It was time to abandon that dream, to begin training Harry to be the wizard he needed to be.

That seemed to be the end of the conversation. The three left, and Madam Pomfrey managed to convince her to stay in the Hospital Wing for a night. Daphne slept through the night, though she tossed and turned as the memory of her first kill continued to cycle through her mind, just as they had for the months after she'd done it.

And despite the fact that that young, unnamed Death Eater was only the first that she would kill in her career as a vigilante and an Auror, that memory, above all others, continued to haunt her. She would never forget thinking that she'd just killed someone younger than she.

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A/N: I'm sorry it took so long to get this out, especially with the monster cliffie I left you with. I'm in senior year of high school, and am also in the middle of the college process. My Beta is busy as well, hence the wait. The next chapter should be out within a week, because I've written most of it.

The true nature of Harry's power is revealed here. It won't always manifest itself like that, but you get an idea of the power he possesses. And it has a bit of a mind of its own. Remember that.

Daphne is clinging to what little is left of her sanity. She was willing to kill Sirius not because she thought he was a Death Eater, but because he tried to take Harry away from her. What makes her even more dangerous is that she appears quite sane under normal circumstances. She is no longer thinking rationally, and she deceives herself at every turn. Ginny was right; she belongs in St. Mungos.

The scene where she kills the young Death Eater is based loosely off of one of my favorite sequences from the HBO miniseries Band of Brothers. In it, the commander of Easy Company, Major Winters, shoots a young German at point blank range as he stares curiously back at him. It's not actually historically accurate, but I love it nonetheless. Sirius's memory was the most obvious I could think of. His parents really were horrible human beings.

Speaking of Sirius, he gets a raw deal in this book, indeed, he isn't very fortunate throughout the entire series.

Remus does get to save the day.

Dumbledore's absence will be explained, and will have importance. It may not happen for a while. I wanted to absolve Dumbledore of any guilt for failing to intervene, because it would have ruined what I had going if he had. I don't hate Dumbledore, and I don't want my stories to make my readers hate him.

The man mentioned at the end of the Power scene is *extremely* important, and will be introduced formally in the next book.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!

## Chapter 20: Reawakening

*It's nice to get positive attention for once,* Harry thought as he walked down the Third Floor Corridor.

Of course, not everyone had figured out that the magical disturbance that had awakened a number of students emanated from Harry, but enough did, and word was spreading. People were looking at him wherever he went, but for the first time it was in awe and admiration, not fear or revulsion. Well, there was some trepidation, but not much.

Daphne had long since returned to Dressler Manor, but not before she, Dumbledore and Harry attempted to unravel the mystery of what had happened that night. Harry felt no ill effects from the burst of magic he had released, outside of the temporary magical exhaustion that he'd recovered from remarkably quickly. He'd performed several simple spells as a test, and found while they were a bit more powerful than usual, it was nothing alarming. Harry had noticed that his power had slowly been increasing as the year had worn on, which seemed to indicate that his body was naturally adjusting. He knew that he and Daphne would have a lot of work over the summer trying to complete the transition.

But outside of that, there was also the issue of how nearly half of the Dementors assigned to guard Hogwarts had simply *vanished*. The remainder seemed almost frightened of approaching the castle. For the short term, it wasn't an issue, as a detachment of Aurors (including the recently confirmed Tonks) had come to take the remainder back to Azkaban. Dumbledore had assured the Ministry that while still at large, Sirius Black would be unable to enter the wards. To many, it might have seemed strange that no one had ever thought of that, but to Harry, it reinforced the fact that there were still many things about the magic that flowed through Hogwarts that the venerable old Headmaster simply didn't know about.

His friends, however, had been another story altogether.

Hermione's reaction to her experience in the Forest had been difficult to judge, as she'd been immediately consumed by anxiety about their upcoming final exams. Harry understood that she'd broken her ankle in the process of fleeing through the Forest, and that none other than

Blaise Zabini had come to her rescue; the Slytherin boy himself outside because of a stupid dare by Theodore Nott. Harry might have found the episode humorous if not for the dire circumstances it averted. Still, it served as a reminder that even Blaise still did idiotic, juvenile things. Harry had thanked his new friend, and Blaise had been somewhat awkward during that conversation. It obviously wasn't something he had envisioned being praised for in the past.

Then there had been Ginny, and her aloofness was what was troubling Harry at the moment. *Something* had happened deep inside the Forbidden Forest, something somehow worse than being tortured with the Cruciatus Curse by an ex-Death Eater. Ginny seemed to be having trouble sleeping, evidenced by the dark circles under her eyes and her snappish nature of late. She was very irritable, and asking her if she wanted to talk about it had resulted in the redhead growling and running for the safety of her dormitory. Hermione hadn't known what to make of it, though she'd promised to talk to Ginny at some point.

Harry had considered asking Daphne, but thought better of it. He wasn't sure what she had done to the Death Eaters she encountered, but he somehow knew one of them hadn't escaped to slink back to their hideout. He *did* have the full story of what had happened to Sirius, and now knew that not only was his Godfather innocent, but that Peter Pettigrew was alive. He had lead the other two Death Eaters and Greyback onto the Grounds, and had been seen by Daphne during the struggle.

Sirius Black's whereabouts were unknown, though Dumbledore and Daphne seemed unconcerned by this, indicating to Harry that they had a pretty good idea of where he was. Harry also noted that his Firebolt was missing, and Daphne told him that she'd given it to Sirius so that he could make his escape. She refused to say more about the subject, and Harry would bet a thousand Galleons that there had been *much* more than that. To Daphne, the fact that Sirius was innocent of betraying Harry's parents and the Order, and betraying Peter Pettigrew, was irrelevant. What was undisputed was that Sirius was guilty of trying to kidnap Harry, and whatever his reasons, that was, in Daphne's mind, an even greater crime.

Harry wasn't sure what to think of his Godfather. Really, he knew nothing about him except a few details about his background and some slips Remus had made while they were discussing Harry's parents. Black was obviously somewhat unbalanced from his stay in Azkaban. Harry had told Black that he was talking to himself in part to annoy him and throw him off balance, but also because it was very significant. Black obviously seemed horrified that his best friend's son had been sorted into the House of Serpents, and seemed to possess an irrational hatred of Slytherins, mostly because of Snape, for whom he held an entirely different type of loathing. Harry also suspected that his brother was a Slytherin, though he didn't know that for sure.

Occlumency lessons with the aforementioned Potions Master had taught him enough to keep his nightmares at bay, and he was making enough progress to make mastering it the next year a reasonable goal. Harry was grateful, both for the fact that he wouldn't have to let Snape grope around in his mind for painful memories, and that he didn't have to re-experience his near-death or Turning experience at the claws and teeth of Fenrir Greyback. For some reason, despite the fact that he'd emerged from the Forest relatively unscathed, it was the realization of how close he'd once again come to death that continued to haunt him.

He stopped in front of the door leading to Professor Lupin's office. He hadn't thanked Remus yet, really. And he hadn't managed to muster the composure and words needed. The thought that he should express his gratitude had been with him from the beginning, but things were, of course, easier said than done.

He knocked twice, and heard a muffled voice call for him to enter. He slowly pushed the door open, his eyes taking in the scene before him. Remus was seated at his desk, several essays lying in front of him, a larger pile of graded essays marked with red ink. The werewolf, looking paler and more fragile than Harry remembered, smiled warmly as he saw his student come in. "Hello Harry," he said in greeting. "What do you need?"

Harry stepped farther into the office and closed the door softly behind him. "I want to thank you," he began, running through the words in his

head. "He also had me." There was no need to specify who 'he' was. Remus nodded gravely, clearing his throat.

"To be perfectly honest with you, Harry," he said in a soft voice, "it was the first time I've ever been grateful that I was a werewolf. I couldn't bare to see you suffer as I do. No one deserves that, especially not one who has experienced as much as you have."

Harry wasn't sure how to respond, but suddenly felt very awkward standing there. Remus drew his wand and Summoned a chair that had been pushed against the wall. "Please, take a seat." He paused, almost as if he was preparing a speech. "Harry, I'm sure what happened to you was frightening, not so much because of the physical threat to your life, but because of what you could have *become* as a result. Please, understand that I am not offended by this. Like it or not, werewolves are among the foulest Dark creatures on this earth. That we can exist as normal wizards for most of the month doesn't change this, nor does the fact that with the help of the Wolfsbane Potion, I can control my wolf. It does not change the fact that with one Bite, I can ruin a life."

Harry sank hard into his chair. Remus was being more open and candid about his condition than Harry had every heard him. He'd obvious tried to plan out what he was going to say in advance. He opened his mouth to respond, but couldn't find the words. Instead, he blurted, "What happened to Greyback?"

Remus shrugged. "I don't remember much – even with Wolfsbane, my memories of the event are fuzzy at best. Despite the fact that he was larger than me, I am more agile." He shrugged again. "I don't know how he manages to retain his mass despite the transformations. Perhaps he has so embraced his wolf that he no longer becomes ill by the prospect of the Transformation." He looked Harry in the eye. "The fact that I do understand how he does it is the reason that I am not like him. Regardless, we likely fought to a standstill. I was in quite a bad way when I stumbled into the Hospital Wing that morning. Madam Pomfrey fixed me up, though."

Harry nodded in understanding. He frowned as something occurred to him. "How did you know where to find me? How did you know that I was in danger?"

Remus smiled bitterly. "Sirius has always been a bit clumsy with his things. Leaving the Marauder's Map open on the floor is somewhat typical of him. I was able to find out what happened, but I wouldn't have gone anywhere except for the fact that I saw Greyback trailing you. I *had* to act!" he said, with more emotion than he probably meant to.

"I'm glad you did," Harry said softly.

Remus looked at him. "You don't need to thank me, Harry. I did what I did because I had no choice. I didn't go after him because it was *you*..." At Harry's look of confusion, he clarified, "What I meant to say is that it didn't matter who it was; I wasn't going to allow Fenrir to ruin another life the same way he ruined mine. I was *lucky*, Harry, because I found several close friends...and I'll even include Wormtail in that, because whatever caused him to turn against us, his friendship before that was genuine. Most of my kind live alone, abandoned by society and some even by their loved ones." He paused. "That's the most nefarious thing about my kind, Harry. We can create a difference that overcomes reason and family bonds. That's why I hate Fenrir Greyback."

Harry nodded, impressed. Remus was a shining example of the Gryffindor House. He was a man that, no matter what the odds, would stand up for what he believed in and put himself at risk to save and protect others, whether they were close to him or not. Harry wasn't sure if he could say the same about himself. Would he be willing to risk his life for Ron Weasley or Draco Malfoy? Probably not.

"I understand, to an extent, why Daphne sent Sirius away the way she did. Though I doubt she had his well-being in mind, she wanted him away from you, and the fact that it was the much safer path for him, however coincidental it was, makes it the right choice." He sighed. "I just wished I would have had a chance to talk to him. To apologize for giving up on him."

"I think he'll forgive you," Harry told him. "He's probably desperate for your friendship right now."

"What about you?" Remus asked.

Harry blinked, surprised. "Sorry?"

"What about you?" Remus repeated. "Will you be able to forgive him? He deserves a second chance, Harry. His first one wasn't exactly under ideal circumstances."

Memories rushed back to Harry, especially those involving the fear and despair he'd felt while he was under Sirius's Imperious Curse. He'd vowed that he'd never be controlled again, and devoid of his magic, there was no way for him to break free. "He did something he shouldn't have," Harry said carefully. Then, throwing caution to the wind, he blurted. "He used the Imperious Curse on me."

Remus's eyes widened a bit, and he closed his eyes. "I don't mean to play down the effects that had on you, but I can assure you that that must have *killed* him. He's probably still beating himself up about it."

"He was in *desperate* circumstances," Harry reasoned. He shook his head. "After last year, I don't...I don't know if I can forget that."

Remus looked at him for a long moment, measuring his emotions. "I'd like to ask you to try, Harry. He deserves to get to know you. He's as loyal to you, in his own way, as Daphne is. He'd die for you, Harry, and because of that, you should give him a chance."

"I'll...I'll try," Harry agreed. Remus nodded, content.

"Rest assured, he'll smother you with apologies the next time you meet. He detests Dark Magic in every form." He might not ever forgive *himself*."

Harry was silent for a while, and Remus took that as a sign to continue. "I suppose I'll be seeing a lot of him this summer...and probably for some time after that..."

Harry frowned as he processed the implications. "You aren't coming back next year?" he asked, surprised. "You've been an excellent teacher, putting aside the quality of our previous instructors."

"Thank you for that, Harry, but really, my choice has nothing to do with how good a teacher I've been or haven't been. It'd been very *stressful* trying to keep my secret, and I get the idea that Snape will let it slip at first opportunity. If that happened, parents would complain to the Ministry, and not only would they order Dumbledore to sack me, but they'll also question his decision to hire me in the first place. They might also pass a law that prohibits the arrangement I've had with him in order to live and work here," Remus explained. "I want to go out on my own terms."

"Where will you go?" Harry asked him.

Remus shrugged. "I don't know. But Dumbledore has bent the laws a bit, and I'll have enough financial resources to live in relative comfort. And I'm sure Sirius wouldn't mind giving me some of his family fortune." He smiled, "I don't like accepting handouts, but it will be the rough equivalent of dancing on his parent's graves. Imagine their faces if they knew that some of the Black Family fortune was being given to a werewolf."

Harry smiled, appreciating the irony. "You'll be here for the rest of term, I'm sure."

Remus nodded. "Yes. I don't plan to say anything to the students, though you may of course tell Ginny and Hermione. I feel somewhat guilty about leaving like that, but it would bring up a number of questions that I don't want to answer."

Harry decided not to argue with Remus, as it was clear that his mind was made up. He smirked inwardly. *One way or another, the Curse of the DADA Professor lives.*

"There *is* one more thing," Remus said. He produced the folded parchment that he'd previously referred to. "I believe you should have this. James, Sirius... *Wormtail*, and I created it during our time at Hogwarts. Lily even made some improvements to it. Regardless of

what you think of your father, I think it's only right that this particular heirloom is passed on."

"So it's a kind of magical map?" Harry asked.

"It's a little more than that," Remus said with a smile. He lay the parchment flat on his desk, tapped it with his wand, and said, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Harry snorted. But his amusement was short-lived. As soon as Remus spoke, ink lines began appearing on the previously blank parchment. When they finished appearing, Harry was staring at a map displaying not only every floor of the castle, properly labeled, but also every *person* in the castle. Including him and Remus. "Merlin, that's amazing," Harry breathed.

Remus smiled proudly. "I daresay James spent more time creating this than he ever did on his homework. Sirius too. It's yours, Harry. Do with it what you wish. Since I am no longer your teacher, I don't feel guilty about it. I'm sure you'll find use for it, even if you don't follow in James' footsteps."

"I'm sure you're right," Harry said. "Thank you."

"Ah, just one more thing. To clear the map, simply tap your wand and say "Mischief Managed." Remus did, and the parchment was soon blank. Harry took it from him and stuffed in the pocket of his robes. He decided he would tell his friends about it, but few others.

They spent another hour discussing lighter topics, including the remaining material they had to learn before their exams. Harry was very pleased by how well he and Remus were getting along. He admired the man in many ways.

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Ginny Weasley sat on the edge of one of the couches in the Slytherin Common Room, absently swinging her left leg around and staring directly into the roaring fire. Inside the redhead's mind, her thoughts swirled around in a confused mess. She'd been there for at least an hour, probably more, and it was well past curfew. Anne had finally

given up on trying to get her to come upstairs, and just left her alone with her thoughts.

Truth be told, Ginny didn't want to go to sleep. The nightmares were simply too much. *And the worst part is that I can't tell Harry*, she thought glumly. *I can't destroy his relationship with the only mother he's ever known. What kind of friend would I be if I did that?*

Harry's relationship with Daphne was one that Ginny couldn't understand at times. She wasn't sure if she'd still love her own mother if Molly Weasley had done *half* the things that Daphne Artemis Dressler had done to Harry. Let alone what she'd done to other. Daphne was *sick*, that was very clear. She should have a private ward at St. Mungo's, not legal guardianship of the Boy-Who-Lived. And yet at times Harry wouldn't hear a word against her. His doubts about her competency that he'd expressed to her seemed to have evaporated overnight.

What Ginny had seen in the Forest told her that Harry had been right to worry about his guardian...and that it was even worse than both of them had guessed.

And Ginny had absolutely no idea what to do about it. All she knew was that every night, when she lay her head down and closed her eyes, vivid nightmares of what Daphne had done to the Death Eater cycled through her mind. She knew she actually hadn't seen a large amount of what had happened, but her mind was more than capable of making up the difference. Sleep came in brief, interrupted spurts, and she often spent hours tossing and turning, unable to drift off peacefully. She could only hope that it would get better when she returned to her mother and to the Burrow, where she felt at home. It wasn't as though Hogwarts was foreign to her, but the dungeons simply didn't possess the warm, welcoming feeling that her childhood home had.

She sighed tiredly, glancing down at her twirling leg. She reached into her robes for her wand cast the Time Spell. It was about twenty minutes to midnight. She smiled, imagining that Hermione was probably still buried under a couple of metric tones of textbooks, holed up in a corner of the Gryffindor Common Room. It still amazed

Ginny that despite the fact that Hermione was the best student in their class, she still feared academic failure constantly. Perhaps that motivation was what kept the quality of her work up? Ginny didn't know, and wasn't entirely certain she wanted to find out. She liked Hermione, but that didn't mean she wanted to obsess about classes and marks as much as she did. Ginny was a fine student, she worked hard when she had to, and she was attentive and energetic in class (with the exception of History of Magic, which *only* Harry and Hermione could find enjoyable.) She was sure her mother would be pleased with her performance, even if she didn't match the near-perfection of Percy, and too a lesser extent, Bill. She smiled at the thought of her walking around in perfectly clean robes completely devoid of wrinkles, wearing horn-rimmed glasses and wearing her hair in a tight bun. No, that was *not* her.

Of course, returning to the Burrow would mean yet another summer of Ron's brainless and ignorant declarations about the evils of Slytherins, Harry in particular. The two hadn't clashed directly yet this year, but it was clear that neither one would be offering his hand in friendship any time soon. Percy still had some reservations, but everyone else seemed to have gotten used to the reality of having a Slytherin in the family. It was still somewhat odd to see her green-trimmed robes in a pile of red-trimmed ones, awaiting Molly Weasley's Cleaning Spells. But what Harry had told her about Slytherin House had done a great deal to erase her doubts. She was proud to have been Sorted into the house of the sharp-minded and cunning, and could see those traits in a positive light.

Harry was as important a role-model as he was a friend to Ginny. He obviously cared about her, though she wasn't as certain that he felt something deeper for her as she had been before. She was hoping that she hadn't just imagined it, that it was some vestige of her childhood crush. She had enough to deal with without bringing *that* back into the picture. Regardless of that relic of her childhood, the reasons she liked Harry were very evident to her. He was intelligent and thoughtful, and showed, despite his stubbornness and occasional delusions of grandeur, a willingness to listen to both her and Hermione. Hermione's influence over him could be easily explained. It was the fact that he treated her the way he did, despite the fact that she was a year younger than him, that made him special. He didn't

ask much of Hermione or Ginny, and he was always willing to help either one of them, (though Ginny needed his help and advice far more often than Hermione did.) It wasn't fair to say that she wouldn't have done as well in her classes if not for their help, but they certainly didn't hurt. And some of the Quidditch advice that Harry had given her had been invaluable. She'd suffered a big loss of confidence after her lack-luster debut, and he'd helped her through that.

She didn't hear him silently creep down the stairs, but she felt a presence behind her, and spun around in surprise. Harry stood there, wearing his pajamas underneath a green robe. His hair was tousled and untidy, something that Ginny found absolutely adorable. The expression in his remarkably alert emerald eyes was both curious and puzzled at the same time. "What are you doing down here this late?" he asked.

Ginny tried to organize her thoughts. "Just...thinking," she admitted truthfully. Inside, she was trying not to panic. Harry had a way of making her want to blurt out exactly what was troubling her. His presence, at least when he wasn't worked up about something, was soothing and comforting. He really was, despite his shortcomings, an amazing friend.

"About what?" he asked, moving around the couch and plopping down beside her. She immediately felt even more uncomfortable. Harry was blissfully unaware of that fact that she possessed knowledge that would, at the very least, provoke a strong and emotional reaction from him. He'd been doing so well since the Forest, and she didn't want to upset him. That wasn't fair.

*Nothing. Please go away! I've been having nightmares,* she admitted. *No! Bloody hell, why did I tell him that!*

Harry frowned. "About the Forest?" he asked, venturing a likely guess.

She nodded, cursing herself again. She felt pathetic. She couldn't keep a secret from Harry, not if he asked her about it directly. It was the exact same with Harry, except that it was Hermione who could force about anything out of him. She didn't always need to deny him her companionship; her voice and insistence were enough. *What are you, some immature little schoolgirl?*

She tried to reel in her self-deprecation. Harry was just trying to be helpful. Hermione had told her that Harry had been haunted by many nightmares during his first year, nightmares he'd dealt with in the past, but ones that seemed to be exacerbated by the absence of Daphne and the stress he had been under. He hadn't had anyone to turn to, and Hermione thought he'd done something in response that embarrassed him to the point where he refused to speak about it. Ginny wasn't sure that really made sense. Harry might have done something stupid, but breaking a rule wasn't a good enough reason to keep it from his best friends. Harry was too open for that; no, Ginny suspected he'd found out about something else, something that was too personal to share. She didn't have any idea what it was, however.

Harry was staring at her now, concern in his eyes. "Are you *sure* you're alright?" he asked again.

"Yes, I'm *sure*," she snapped at him, throwing him a withering glare. He flinched but held his ground. Ginny felt her anger evaporate and be replaced by shame. *What is wrong with me?* she asked herself.

Harry looked torn between telling her that he didn't believe her and just letting the matter go for now. "You shouldn't be down here," he said finally. "You...well, you look awful, Ginny. You definitely need to get more sleep."

"Thanks Harry, I hadn't noticed," she replied sarcastically. Inside, she was screaming for him to go away, to leave her alone. But Harry had gone through this before, and Ginny knew that he wouldn't let her suffer through it alone. And as much as she hated him for that, she also loved it. His persistence and unwillingness to surrender or give up was one of the things that made him so special...and so *infuriating*.

Harry looked taken aback. "Sorry," he blurted, "I didn't mean...well...I didn't mean to upset you. I was just trying to point out the truth." He shifted closer to her and tentatively put his arm around her shoulders, obviously trying to comfort her as best he could. She stiffened at his touch, and her internal screams for him to leave her in peace got even louder.

He pulled his arm back, surprised. "Did I...did I do something?" he asked, sounding stunned. "You're angry at me," he said, a bit uncertain.

Ginny frowned. "How do you *know* that?" she asked, somewhat indignantly.

Harry shrugged, looking into the fire. "I'm not sure. I just...*know*," he told her.

"Well don't *do* it again," Ginny told him, shifting towards the other end of the couch. *Can't he just take a hint and leave?*

"Why?" Harry asked, yawning.

Ginny glared at him. "Because I like having *privacy*? Has it occurred to you that I don't *like* having people, even my friends, rummaging around in my head?"

Harry looked decidedly uncomfortable now. "I wasn't *rummaging*," he got out. "I just felt, well...these strong feelings of animosity. I've done some reading on the abilities of really powerful wizards, and the ability to sense feelings...not quite to the extent that a person with Empathy can, mind you, but..." he shrugged again. "Well, I can sense them."

Ginny nodded, trying to stay composed. She was failing rapidly. Without warning, she flung herself at him, latching onto him tightly and burying her face in his shoulder. Harry slowly, awkwardly wrapped his arms around her, one of them gently patting her back. She shuddered, waiting for the tears to come. They did. Harry sat there, unmoving, rocking her in his arms, trying to do his best to comfort her even though he didn't actually understand what was wrong.

Finally, exhausted and feeling the effects of fatigue beginning to catch up to her, she broke away, sitting down on the couch next to him. She deliberately avoided looking at him, embarrassed by her emotional display. The incident was bringing back memories of her first, miserable night at Hogwarts.

Harry reached out and gently pulled her chin so that she was facing him. Concerned eyes looked over her. "Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?" he asked again.

She turned her head away and he let go. She shook her head. "No. I'm sorry, Harry, but you can't help me with this."

"Can you at least talk to Hermione?" he suggested. He paused, and then said, "I don't like seeing you this upset. And you won't tell me what's bothering you..."

Ginny closed her eyes. "Harry, please go. I'll go to bed, but you need to leave." She opened her eyes to see his response.

Harry nodded and got up. "Alright," he said slowly. He began to head for the stairs down to his dormitory. He stopped, turning around slowly. "Ginny?"

She turned. "Yes?"

He sighed, obviously trying to find words. "Don't...don't hold it inside. Trust me, it isn't good for you. All it causes is pain." With that, he turned and walked down the stairs without looking back. After staring into the fire for another minute, Ginny got up, straightened her robes, and headed for the other side of the room to do the same thing.

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Harry's eyes hardened as they stared into the blank blue eyes of Daphne Greengrass. The girl returned his gaze without blinking. Her emotional control was remarkable for a girl of her age. She radiated calm and serenity, with a slight bit of curiosity. Her almost flawless visage betrayed no emotion; no trepidation, no anger, no frustration with Harry's lack of response, not even the pride or arrogance that so characterized Pureblood Heirs such as herself. It was easy to see now why she was so easily lost in a crowd; her blank, disinterested expression simply didn't catch one's eye. Her blond hair, probably quite stunning if it were properly arranged, was tied in a simple ponytail that fell to the middle of her back. It was almost hard to believe that she was human.

Her voice was the same way. Flat, devoid of emotion or indications that she cared about what she was doing. "You have nothing to say?" she asked, slipping in a bit a disapproval. Of course, it was impossible to know if she disapproved or not; she was just as good at manufacturing emotions as she was at hiding them. Harry supposed that she probably wasn't very good at displaying strong false emotions, but it didn't really matter because it would be so out of character that no one would believe it. Daphne Greengrass and Daphne Dressler shared nothing but a first name; their personalities were almost the antithesis of one another.

"I must admit I'm a bit surprised by this news," Harry told her. "I hadn't expected that...that my actions would have such far reaching consequences."

Daphne considered that. "You probably aren't as familiar with the histories of powerful wizards as you should be. Otherwise you wouldn't be as surprised." Again, there was a slight hint of disapproval, but real or fake? Harry couldn't tell.

"I will seek to change that," Harry said after a brief pause. There was no denying it; Daphne Greengrass had embarrassed him during their last meeting. She was an expert at this; he was merely a novice. And while not all purebloods were like Greengrass, enough of them were that he needed to learn to pick up subtle hints and not fall into verbal traps laid for him. He needed to control his impulsivity and think out his responses. Eventually, he believed, this would come naturally to him, and he wouldn't have to spend as much time thinking about what he was going to say.

"Good," the Heiress replied simply. "You should expect a letter from my father sometime this year. I do not know when, nor would I tell you even if I did. My father would be taking a great risk throwing in his lot with the Light. But not choosing a side last time cost him dearly."

It still astounded Harry how Daphne could speak about the death of her mother and older sister in such neutral tones. Harry himself had trouble keeping the pain and anger out of his voice when he discussed the murder of his own parents. He was getting better at it, though.

"I look forward to it," Harry said, trying to keep the enthusiasm he felt out of his voice. It wouldn't do well to appear like a child bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet waiting for a birthday present. Then, something Daphne had said caught his attention. "If I may ask, why do you feel that allying with me is the same as pledging your loyalty to the Light?"

For the first time, Daphne seemed somewhat taken aback. She blinked in surprise, obvious caught off guard. She recovered her composure as quickly as she had lost it. "Are you not loyal to Dumbledore?" she asked, genuine interest showing through her cold exterior.

Harry shrugged. "I respect the man, but I do not see him as a mentor."

"Interesting," Daphne said, though Harry couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic or not. She paused, then asked. "Tell me, Potter, do you ever see yourself pledging your loyalty to the Dark? Not to the Dark Lord, obviously, but declaring yourself a Dark Wizard? I daresay the uproar would be spectacular."

Harry considered that. She was right, of course. Most of the Wizarding World tended to regard Dark Wizards with suspicion at best, directly associated them with Voldemort at worst. Light and Dark pureblood families regarded each other with contempt born of centuries of political and at times military warfare. The news that Harry Potter, the heir of a predominant Light family, the boy who was credited with defeating one of the most feared wizards in history, the boy who had been raised by the Grey Maiden, one of the staunchest defenders of the Light to ever live, had chosen the Dark, would send shockwaves through the magical community. And yet Harry couldn't dismiss it out of hand. He knew better than most wizards, knew that Dark Wizards and Witches weren't *evil*. They practiced different rituals, believed in different philosophies and tactics. Dark Wizards allowed emotion to empower them, but only those who allowed it to rule them were at risk of becoming corrupt. Light Wizards didn't shun emotion, but felt that by using less harmful spells and fighting for what they perceived as the common good, they had the moral high ground.

"Tell," he stopped, finding his words. "Tell your father that I remain open to all forms and philosophies of magic at this point. And that I will not allow my family heritage to dictate my path. I will choose it based upon which I feel I am best suited for. I have no other choice."

Daphne studied him for a long moment, and then smiled slightly. "I am pleased to hear it, Potter. And I must admit I am impressed by the fact that you would even consider declaring for the Dark. Perhaps if you did, it might change the inaccurate perception that Dark Wizards are scum that seek chaos and destruction. It sickens me that we are perceived that way. Lost is the appreciation of the simply beauty and elegance of Dark Magic."

Harry nodded, understanding. "It would be good if I could do that. But misconceptions run deep in our society."

Daphne simply nodded. "Expect a letter from my father. It will likely be delivered by a peregrine falcon, a rare bird found in North America. It has been in my family for two generations."

"Alright," Harry replied, cautious. "I suppose that's all you wanted to tell me?"

Daphne paused. "I felt your magic that night. I was something I'd never expected out of you. I'd always believed that you were a false hero, a baby lauded for no reason by a Wizarding World desperate for a savior. I thought you would arrive here arrogant and full of self-importance. I also believed that you be exposed for what you were. My father believed I was mistaken, and told me so repeatedly. Aiden Greengrass has an appreciation for you that I simply cannot understand," she said, using her father's first name for the first time. Harry saved it to ask his guardian what it meant. When purebloods had unusual names, they normally had a secondary meaning. *Aiden* was not a normal name, like Daphne or Harry. Though he had to admit, *Harry* was more common in the Muggle world than it was among wizards. He'd never met another Harry.

"I glad too. My guardian told me the truth very early," he stopped, realizing that it was possible that Greengrass didn't know...

Daphne favored him with a sly smile. “Continue, Potter. My father has a theory of how you survived the Killing Curse twice. The first, he believes, was by your mother’s protection. The second was by the Philosopher’s Stone.”

Harry gaped at her. “How..?”

“My father is the foremost *expert* of Dark Curses and their uses and drawbacks,” she explained. “As he told me this year, there are only two ways to stop a Killing Curse. The first is a form of ancient emotional magic. The second is by obstructing it with a powerful magical object.”

She continued. “My father says that the former is a kind of blood magic, actually evidence that Light Wizards weren’t as averse to the use of blood in magical rituals as they claim to have always been. It is a charm that creates a temporary protection by draining the magic of a witch or wizard to shield a person he or she loves the most. It is a complicated charm, mastered by few. This love must be so powerful that the person casting it must be willing to surrender life and magic for the person they seek to protect. It *cannot* exist between husband and wife, as they are not related by blood, but it *can* between brother and sister, father and child, cousin and cousin, or, of course, *mother and child*.”

Harry nodded. “Lily gave her life to save mine.”

“More than *that*, Potter,” Daphne corrected him. “She also gave her magic. She was, for all intents and purposes, a *Muggle* when she died. My father has always been fascinated by this phenomenon, as it contradicts the conventional wisdom that a Killing Curse cannot be blocked. It most clearly *can*.”

“My mother’s magic protected me in the Forest during my first year, too,” Harry told her. “Voldemort tried to harm me, using his servant, Professor Quirrell. He was unable to approach me, but it almost killed me.”

“I am not surprised,” Daphne told him after a moment of thought. “Much of her magic was destroyed when it absorbed the Dark Lord’s Killing Curse. What little was left stayed with you. But to fend off the

Dark Lord a second time, it needed *your* magic as well. It was the first time that you suffered magical exhaustion, and that is always the most dangerous time as well.” She paused. “You’d be amazed how often my father talks about this, Potter. It fascinates him. He is *obsessed* by it. And yet, strangely, he still believe in *your* power. He believes that you have the capacity and the destiny to kill the monster that destroyed my family.” She flicked a few rebellious strands of blond hair that has escaped her pony tail back out of her eyes. “I will reserve judgment, for now.”

Harry nodded. He was suddenly very much looking forward to meeting Aiden Greengrass. “The second time, as you said, was dumb luck. Voldemort’s curse happened to hit the pocket where I had the Philosopher’s Stone, and that saved me.”

Daphne simply nodded. “This will be the last time I speak to you this year, Potter. Be watchful, Potter. The cloak of darkness will hovers over the horizon.”

With that, she slipped back into the shadows of the dungeons, leaving Harry alone, his mind racing.

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“Mr. Potter,” the diminutive Professor Flitwick asked Harry, “would you please demonstrate a Warming Charm by casting it on me, followed by a Cooling Charm?”

Harry nodded, aimed his wand, and cast the Charm. An orange light emerged from the tip of his wand, enveloping the Charms Professor. He clapped in approval. “Excellent, Mr. Potter! I must say I’m grateful; Ms. Patil overdid it a bit, but you were just perfect.”

Harry held back a smile. Padma rarely screwed up at anything, but it seemed that she hadn’t been in top form today. He had no doubt that Flitwick was referring to the Ravenclaw Patil, because the Gryffindors hadn’t taken their Charms Exam yet.

“Now, Mr. Potter, a Cooling Charm, please. Do hurry up; it’s getting a bit toasty.”

Harry performed the spell, and was satisfied by the haze of blue light that he produced. The Charms canceled each other out, and Flitwick looked pleased. Harry hadn't been particularly worried about this exam; it was his Transfiguration exam that he'd spent the most time on. Potions had been quite a challenge, as Snape had decided to create an entirely different exam for his two advanced pupils, one that tested both their knowledge of different potions and their ingredients, and also tested their precision and attention to detail, both critically important skills for successful potion brewing. At the higher levels, a slight mistake could mean the difference between a well-made potion and an explosive mess. The Head of Slytherin had also made it obvious that he wanted to continue the tutoring next year. They'd also keep working at Occlumency. Harry wasn't exactly blowing through the training, but he was making progress, albeit with a bit of regression mixed in. His dreams, at least, were peaceful. It took Snape about two minutes to completely break down his defenses.

"Very well done! Full marks!" Flitwick told him. Harry smiled. "If you would please send in Ms. Turpin?"

Harry nodded, gathered his things, slung his bag over his shoulder, and exited the classroom. Lisa stood near the door, waving her wand around in precise patterns. She glanced up at him as he approached her. To Harry's immense relief, the Muggleborn Ravenclaw didn't seem to have held what Harry had done to her under Riddle control against him. They weren't close friends, but they hadn't really been before she had been Petrified. Still, she was a nice, intelligent girl, and she'd been one of the first Ravenclaws to give him a chance. "Your turn," he told her.

"Thanks," she, grabbing her own bag. "How did it go?"

"Very well," Harry admitted. "Don't worry about it; I'm sure you'll do fine."

Lisa gave him a pleasant smile and entered Flitwick's classroom.

*One more exam, Harry thought. Just the Defense exam this afternoon and I'm finally finished. And then I can go home, and start training.*

In addition to his Transfiguration and Potions exams, Harry had already taken his Care of Magical Creatures, Ancient Runes, Astronomy, and Herbology. He'd passed all of them without a great deal of difficulty. Ancient Runes had involved more memorization than the others, though Harry had needed to remember a large number of plants and their properties for Herbology. Care of Magical creatures had been completely practical, without a written examination. Basically, they had been asked to identify a few different types of creatures, tell him the best way to approach a hippogriff (Hagrid hadn't actually brought one with him,) keep a Flobberworm alive and healthy for an hour, and to spot the difference between a cat and a Kneazle. It hadn't been very challenging. Astronomy had involved making a basic map of the heavens and memorizing the planets and some of the moons.

Harry headed directly for the Library, where he knew Hermione would be, studying for her two remaining exams: Defense Against the Dark Arts and Potions. The latter was actually tomorrow (the schedule never called for students to take more than two exams per day) but it was the one that worried Hermione the most. Hermione had more difficulty with Potions than she would admit to, especially now that they were required to work alone. Her memory of ingredients was exceptional, but she had trouble adjusting after she made a mistake. She became flustered and panicked, and though her marks were quite good, they weren't what she wanted. Still, she didn't need to study any more than she did; her failings were never in the preparation but in the execution. As for Defense, Remus had told his class that he would be preparing an obstacle course of sorts that would test their knowledge of some of the Dark Creatures they'd learned about.

One of them would be a Boggart, and that was the reason that Harry felt somewhat guilty at the moment. He hadn't exactly asked out of that part of the examination, but he didn't exactly fight Remus on it, either. Remus might have been able to convince himself that it was the right thing to do by reasoning that Harry's worst fear wasn't exactly something that could be made humorous. Hermione had refused to be exempted, and Harry wasn't looking forward to results of her experience with the Boggart. The rest, Harry thought, wouldn't

be much of a challenge. He was quite capable of dealing with Kappas, Hinkypunks, or whatever else Remus decided to throw at them.

He found Hermione where he expected to: holed up behind several stacks of books arranged on several tables and chairs. Her eyes were currently glued to what looked like their Potions text. Harry scanned the titles of the stacked books, and wasn't surprised to see that many of them seemed to cover exactly the same material as their textbooks did, albeit in greater detail. Hermione obviously didn't hear him approach, nor sit down next to her. "You know, you don't need to study advanced Potions to get an 'O' on the exam. Snape might take points off for you trying to show off."

Hermione apparently *had* noticed his presence, because she didn't jump in surprise. "I know *that*," she replied, not taking her eyes off the book. She flipped backward a few pages, evidently re-reading something she hadn't memorized word-for-word the first time around.

"Have you been here since Breakfast?" Harry asked.

She nodded, still reading. "What else did you expect me to be doing?"

Harry shrugged, and then realized she couldn't actually see the gesture. "When's the exam again?" he asked.

This time she did look at him, but only to glare at him. "It's in *thirty minutes*. Honestly, would you care to stop *pestering* me?" she asked. She returned her attention to the Potions textbook. "Potions doesn't come as naturally to *everyone* as it does to you."

"I realize that," Harry told her. "But don't you think you are just making yourself more anxious with all of this last-minute studying. You've been preparing for weeks!"

Hermione glared at him. "Are you trying to tell me something?" she asked impatiently.

To make his point, Harry walked over and yanked the textbook out of Hermione's hands. "Hey!" she protested.

Harry scanned the page that Hermione had been reading. It dealt with a variety of Sleeping Potions that they covered after Christmas Break. They were only supposed to be able to brew the most basic ones. For example, none of them would be mixing up the Draught of Living death, a potentially deadly sleeping potion, especially if it was improperly brewed. That particular draught wasn't one that Harry figured Hermione would have trouble remembering, seeing as it was the subject of the first question he'd ever asked Harry. Snape had also taken points randomly from Hermione for "helping" Harry.

Harry sometimes felt guilty for admiring Snape when the man had initially treated him so horribly. And if Harry had continued to remind him of James Potter, that torment probably would have continued. Snape was bitter, judgmental and certainly knew how to hold a grudge.

Hermione was now glaring at him, arms crossed over her chest in indignation. "Are you planning to actually ask me something or do you intend to just stand there?"

"Fine," Harry said. He quickly found what he was looking for, "What ingredients are used in the Dreamless Sleep Potion that are not used in a typical Sleeping Draught?"

Hermione huffed. "It's not *just* different ingredients...but to answer your question, extremely small amounts of wormwood, Fire Crab extract, and a substantial amount of crushed Folen leaves are the additional ingredients. But the Dreamless Sleep Potion also contains more Flobberworm Mucus," Hermione said, practically reciting the textbook entry verbatim.

Harry closed the book and tossed it back to her. "Why are you studying again? You know everything, yet you refuse to believe that possible. I can see Neville or Weasley putting in this much time; not that that idiot ever *would* devote any of his precious time to anything productive."

"He's quite good at Chess," Hermione pointed out, "but I suppose I see your point." She sighed, staring at her hands. "I just get anxious and feel like I'm going to forget everything."

"You know that's not true," Harry told her, sitting down in the opposite chair once again. "You're bloody brilliant, Hermione, probably one of the best Muggleborn witches that Hogwarts has ever seen...and," he added in a low whisper, "you have a power that you haven't even begun to explore yet. You're going to be something great, and you know it. But you still have doubts."

"On that note," she said, also in a whisper, "do you think I should ask Professor McGonagall about getting lessons from her? Professor Dumbledore seemed to leave the decision up to me."

Harry shrugged. "It's your choice. I'd wait another year, and just avoid using fire-related spells in the meantime. No need to burn down your house."

"You have no *idea* how concerned I am that I'll do exactly that," she told him. She pressed her lips together, and seemed to be anxious to ask him something. Harry stayed quiet for a while, then it dawned on him what she wanted to know.

"You want to know how I dealt with it, don't you?" he asked quietly.

Hermione nodded, biting her lower lip. "I don't understand how you dealt with that. Especially because your power is so much more erratic than mine is. I only have problems when I use certain kinds of spells; you just have too much magic at your disposal."

"That's part of it, yes," Harry admitted, "The other problem is that my magic seems to have a mind of its own. Like me, it doesn't like being confined or restrained, and it has a survival instinct. The Dementors were feeding on my magic, and that's why it lashed out. It was trying to protect *itself*, not necessarily me." Harry shrugged. The idea, which Daphne had introduced to him, was a disturbing possibility, but there wasn't really much he could do. So long as he had strength of will, he could harness his power and not the other way around. If not...well, it wasn't a very pleasant image. Not at all. "Just try not to think about it. You won't be doing magic over the summer anyway, not unless you've become completely incorrigible overnight." Hermione smiled at that, laughing a bit.

"I don't think you have to worry about *that*," she said, her spirits obviously lifted. She closed her eyes, taking a few deep breaths. "Thanks," she said finally. "I needed that."

"No problem," Harry said, grinning. "C'mon, why don't you head over the Dungeons early so that Snape doesn't take points for being 'late.' I heard that one of his younger students blew up a cauldron this morning. He's probably not in a good mood."

Hermione gathered her things, and the two of them left the Library.

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Peter Pettigrew stumbled through the densely-packed trees of the Dark Forest of Albania, his wand held in front of him like a lantern, trying to peer through the darkness. He was on his own; Alecto, still mourning the death of her brother, had refused to come with him and had stayed at the inn where they had rented a room. Peter had encountered many clues that had finally led him to this location. The fact that his Dark Mark was burning more and more with each day he trekked into the Forest seemed to confirm that he was getting closer to finding his master.

It rained constantly here, or so it seemed. The ground was soaked, and his boots were coated with mud. Every so often he'd step into a particularly deep puddle of muck, and he'd get one or both boots stuck. He slept in caves, or in logs. He could at least keep himself dry, but he couldn't conjure anything – he'd always been completely useless at that, failed most of McGonagall's classes. The result was that his living was far from comfortable. But the Dark Lord would surely reward him for coming to him. Perhaps it wasn't out of blind loyalty of the sort that Bellatrix possessed, but he appreciated in his own way that Voldemort had thought of him as valuable. He wasn't searching out of fear.

He shook his head, re-casting the Impervious Water-Repelling Charm on his person and clothing. It was a somewhat strange experience to be rained on without actually feeling wet, but Peter had gotten used to it. Now if only he could do something about this darkness. There were countless tales of the fearsome creatures that inhabited the Dark Forest, from basilisks to feral werewolves, men so consumed by

their curse that they lived like animals even in human form. Werewolves that made Greyback look docile. Of course, there were also tales of vampires, territorial centaurs, wild wraiths, and other Dark or dangerous creatures. Peter didn't want to run into any of them.

Suddenly, his Dark Mark flared. He yelped in pain, slapping his right hand over his left forearm. The pain faded, but he knew he was getting even closer. He pushed aside some undergrowth, disturbing some kind of small rodent, which scampered away out of sight. Peter looked around, but still saw nothing. He pulled his cloak tighter to his body; it felt like he was getting colder.

As he moved through the trees, a cave came into view in front of him. It sank into the ground, disappearing into the earth. He saw motion out of the corner of his eye, and spun to face it. A snake slithered away from him, disappearing into a crevice. Another snake slithered out of the cave, heading past Peter and into the Forest. He felt a cold, all-too-familiar presence lurking ahead of him, and his breath caught in his chest.

Using his wand to light the way, he slowly climbed down the slippery slope into the dank and dark cave. More snakes appeared along the walls, watching him. He knew now that he had found who he was looking for. He slowly advanced into a dark chamber that appeared wider than the tunnel he had just come through. "Master?" he queried, shining his light around.

A high, cold laugh answered him, seeming to come from every direction at once. He spun around repeatedly, then slipped on the slick, moss-covered rock and fell on his backside. The laughter intensified, and then a voice spoke. A voice that he had heard many times before...and still froze his blood.

"*Wormtail...*"

THE END

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A/N: AND SHE'S DONE! WOOHOO!

Well, this story definitely ended up different than what I had expected. The characters, as they are apt to do when their personalities are developed enough, kind of took on a life of their own. I was pleased with the way my writing seemed to improve, at least in my opinion. You may feel differently, however.

Anyway, about the final chapter. Remus is fine. I never had any intention of harming him, and I'm not sure if it's a good thing or a bad thing that I had people anticipating that he and Sirius would die. It's hard to kill people like that so early in the story. It's hard to kill *anyone* of major importance this early in the story. Too much remains to be told at this point.

The Harry/Ginny conflict is one that will be a major theme of the next book, remaining even if and when they get together. Ginny's opinion of Daphne Dressler has been forever altered, and while Harry is able to see the glaring flaws that are in front of him, he also doesn't want to believe that his guardian is finally broken. He's appropriately defensive. When a person loves another person in the way he does, they can be easily blinded. Daphne's coming apart mentally, and Harry has tried to look the other way. I hope the interaction between Harry and Ginny doesn't seem forced. I think it's gotten much better. You also see that Harry can be a bit clueless at times, just like everyone else. The Harry and Hermione bit was included for more of a look into her psyche, which was a bit overdue.

Harry told (the other) Daphne, Greengrass, about what happened on Halloween because he wants to establish a relationship with her father. Was it the smartest thing to do? Of course not. Aiden Greengrass will be formally introduced next book. I promise you this: he won't be anything like what you expect. Daphne resembles her mother, not her father.

I thought about including another scene with Luna, but decided against it. She's not done in this series, of course.

At this point, I'm keeping the Tri-wizard tournament more or less intact, but altering the events a bit. I'm not inventive enough to think up entirely different tasks. Sorry.

Peter is a bit of a pathetic character who I like for some reason. Therefore, you'll be seeing more of him. He's screwed up in his own way, yet scared to death about half the time.

Anyway, I've started the prologue for book 4. Should be out within a week.

REVIEWS! REVIEWS! REVIEWS!